

An aerial photograph of a city, likely New Orleans, is shown with a heavy, dark red overlay that resembles blood splatters. The splatters are most concentrated in the upper right and bottom right corners, with some smaller droplets scattered across the cityscape. The city features a river, bridges, and various buildings.

Butterfly Dawn

Some vacations change you forever



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
ON OCTOBER 19th 2019

Butterfly Dawn

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



BUTTERFLY DAWN

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Time is no substitute for talent

There is a well-known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and a broken keyboard. Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in October 2019. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together.

Tim

October 19, 2019

Butterfly Dawn

chapter one

SN Harrell

“CHEERS! TO ONE BLOODY awful week, I’m glad is over!” Kate tapped her pint glass against that of her friend Zoe.

“You said it!” Zoe responded. She wiped off the beer running down her hand onto the leg of her trousers from her overly enthusiastic clinking of her glass. She couldn’t stop a little giggle from escaping. She’d already had one glass more than she should have but she just wanted to forget the terrible week she just had.

Tucking a strand of her shoulder length brown hair behind her ear she thought of this weekend. Her brother, Craig, had booked them tickets on the Eurostar to Paris for the weekend leaving the next day. Zoe couldn’t wait. This holiday away couldn’t have come at a better time.

Zoe jumped as the buzzing in her back pocket startled her. After a moment she realized it was her phone. She pulled her phone out and had to blink a few times to bring the blurry words into focus. It was a message from her brother, Craig, he’d tried to ring her a few times but hadn’t gotten through. As she pushed her finger across the screen to read the rest of his

message she could feel her shoulders drop.

“No!” she moaned as her fingers flew across the keyboard.

“Are you having a laugh?” she texted her brother.

“No, I wish. Things at work have really gone ball’s up. I can’t go to Paris tomorrow. I’m sorry.” he typed back.

“What?” Zoe could feel Kate peer over her shoulder at the messages. “Oh Zoe. I’m so sorry.” Looking at her friend, Zoe shook her head as her eyes drew together and her mouth twisted into a sad frown. “I really needed this.” she propped her elbows up on the bar to rest her chin in her hands.

“I know.” Kate responded

“We were supposed to go to the fairs this weekend.” Zoe turned her head to look at Kate. “We had plans to go to Urban Art Fair and International Rare Book one too. It’ll be no fun going by myself.”

Kate wrinkled her nose. “Why would you want to go to see some old dusty books?”

Zoe gave a wry chuckle. “I thought that too when I went with Craig the first time but it’s actually pretty wicked.”

“If you say so,” Kate shrugged in response. “I wish I was going with you. Even that boring book fair would be better than sitting home thinking about what a terrible week it’s been.”

Zoe pushed her body upright and leaned against the back of the bar stool. “I just had the most brilliant idea.”

“Okay,” Kate’s head tilted to the side as she raised an eyebrow at Zoe.

“Come with me!” Zoe could see the beginning of excitement cross Kate’s face before it crumpled.

“I can’t.”

“Why? You don’t have any plans.”

“I don’t have the money and you’re riding the Eurostar. To book a ticket for tomorrow would be *way* out of my price range.” Kate leaned back and crossed her arms. “I’m sorry. I really wish I could.”

Zoe knew money was tight for Kate. She also knew this trip would be way more fun if Kate could go, even more so than she’d have had with Craig. Zoe bit her lip lost in thought. *How can I convince her to go with me?* Kate loved to shop and Paris was her favorite city to visit.

She glanced at her friend. Poor Kate was now looking just as gutted as she’d been when they’d walked into the pub determined to drink away the frustrations of the week. *Wait a minute!* Zoe grabbed her phone and typed furiously. When she finished she tapped her friend’s shoulder to get her attention.

“Check your email.” Zoe shifted back and forth in her seat in anticipation. Her body wanted to burst from the excitement she felt. Kate was going to be so surprised!

Giving her a small frown. “You’re acting weird. Why?” she asked as she rooted around in her purse for her phone.

“Come on! Just do it.” Zoe wanted to just show her the screen on her own phone but forced herself to be patient.

Giving her one last glance Kate opened her email. “No way!” she whispered. She lifted her head, her wide eyes staring at her. “Zoe, I can’t pay you back.”

“You don’t need to it’s a gift. I still have money socked away from what my parents left me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely! Please, you’re doing me a favor. This is going to be *so* much more fun with you!”

“Oh my God, I’m chuffed to bits!” Kate squealed. “I can’t believe that by 4:00pm we’ll be checking into our hotel in Paris!” A few nearby patrons gave them annoyed stares as they

grabbed each other's hands and screamed.

###

"Blimey, is this the right room?" Kate turned to Zoe after giving their room an incredulous stare as the two of them stood in the doorway of their tiny hotel room.

"Yup." Zoe gestured towards Kate's enormous suitcase. "I told you to pack light." She couldn't stop an eye roll as Kate protectively moved to block her view of it.

"Listen, you said we had a lot we're going to do. I needed to be prepared for anything."

Walking through the door first Zoe threw her shoulder bag onto the bed. Kate's suitcase slammed into the back of her legs and she had to throw her hand down on the bed as she pitched forward. She grunted at the impact.

"I'm sorry." Kate gave her an apologetic glance. "I'll just tuck it away over there. It'll be like it's not even here." Kate pointed to the other side of the bed and the three foot space that separated it from the wall.

Zoe laughed at her friend's positivity. The room was so small a mouse couldn't hide in here. "It's fine. We're not going to spend much time in here anyway." She glanced at her watch. "We'd better hurry and grab something quick to eat across the street before we call a taxi to get to the catacombs by 5:00pm to purchase our tickets."

They grabbed their purses and rushed downstairs through the lobby and out to the street beyond. The concierge had recommended going to Pizza Chez Nous for a quick bite before calling the taxi since it was just around the corner.

"Come on. The taxi's here!" Kate grabbed her hand and dragged her along.

Using her other hand Zoe shoved the last bit of pizza into her mouth and climbed into the waiting car. Kate was

practically bouncing in her seat. Having a fascination with anything creepy and supernatural is what began their friendship at work.

Pulling up in front of the catacomb entrance Kate jumped out of the taxi and rushed ahead to stand in line for their tickets. They had been warned that the wait would be long and had prepared themselves to not get in right away. Almost two hours later they entered descending down a long spiral staircase. According to the brochure it was 130 steps.

At the bottom Zoe reached out and clutched Kate's arm. Having now stopped, her head was whirling from the circular descent. "Good thing neither of us is claustrophobic." Zoe commented looking up at the low ceiling of the corridor they were in.

Kate gave her a sympathetic gaze and pulled her forward at the discreet cough of the person behind them waiting. "Is this it?" Kate asked a minute later. "There's nothing here," she gestured towards the empty corridor.

They continued to walk following the group of people in front of them. As the crowd dissipated and they reached the ossuaries Zoe gazed around in wonder. The way the monumental heaps of bones were arranged was both artistic and eerie.

As they moved along and listened to the audio guide they were both quiet as they took in the history of the space. Though somber, it was amazing to see how all the bones had been carefully arranged. It was humbling to know how many thousands of people had already walked these halls over the centuries. They had even been warned to stay in the designated areas since the catacombs were so vast it was easy to get lost.

"Do you know what that says?" Kate asked pointing to one of the many poems in French throughout the catacombs.

“Quocumque te vertas mors’in insidiis est. Dequelque coté que tu tournes la mort est aux aguets. My French is a bit rusty, but I think it says something about death waiting for you.”

“I guess we shouldn't be surprised that it's so morbid.” Kate shrugged, already moving on. As Zoe was about to turn and follow her she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She quickly jerked her head in that direction. The creepiness of the catacombs was making her jumpy. There was nothing there.

“What are we looking at?” Kate whispered squinting her eyes to peer down the corridor.

“Uh, I don't know. I thought I saw something.” Zoe frowned and rubbed at her arms. She'd developed a chill and goosebumps ran up and down her arms.

They finished walking through the catacombs but Zoe couldn't shake the feeling of being watched even as they left. They shielded their eyes from the last rays of the sun in its descent in the sky as they emerged from underground.

“Let's head back to the hotel. We can grab a crepe along the way from one of the vendors and see the Eiffel Tower all lit up at night. I hear it's beautiful.” Kate said, her face taking on a dreamy expression.

The taxi quickly approached the tower as the sun set and the moon rose just beyond. Zoe couldn't help pressing her face against the glass as they got closer. The lights had already been turned on and it was a spectacular view. The golden lights twinkled all around the tower. As they climbed out of the taxi the hourly sparkling lights display superimposed itself over the gold lights. For the next five minutes as the gold colors faded and only the sparkling lights remained they weaved their visual spell around all that watched. The magic of the moment created a silence in the air as everyone quieted

around them. The monument was breathtaking.

“Wow,” Zoe said, the crepe they were going to find forgotten.

“Yeah,” Kate said. The awe in her tone spoke volumes. “We *need* a selfie of this!”

Zoe threw her arm around Kate, stuck out her chin and smiled up at the phone Kate held in her hand. Once she’d set the timer and centered it with the Eiffel Tower directly behind them Kate clicked the button to take their picture.

“Tonight is magical!” Zoe exclaimed throwing her arms out wide and doing a little spin. Such enthusiasm wasn’t really like her but tonight felt different. She felt different.

After seeing the tower and visiting a number of vendors along the way, Zoe reminded Kate they should get back. They had a busy day coming up tomorrow. Their plan was to tackle the different fairs during the day and experience Paris’ nightlife before they had to head back Sunday.

Zoe linked her arm through Kate’s as they wandered the short walk back to the hotel. Giving her friend a small smile she barely registered what she was saying as her body gave a slight involuntary shiver. The same sensation she’d had in the catacombs was back. She couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching them. Waiting.

Zoe was sitting on the bed listening to Kate get ready for the day in the nearby bathroom as she swiped through their photos from the night before. They’d snuck a few photos in the catacombs when they thought to. She quickly swiped passed all their silly selfies until she got to the ones at the Eiffel Tower. Kate had gotten it right, it was truly breathtaking.

Just as she was about to turn off her phone a shadow in

the background of the last picture caught her eye. Zooming in Zoe felt a chill race through her body as the shadow morphed into a blurry image of a man. He was too far away for her to make out his features but she could have sworn he was staring right at them. Scrolling back through the ones they'd taken of themselves at the light show Zoe noticed a similar shadow in most of them.

She debated saying something to Kate but didn't want to freak her friend out. Maybe the catacombs had gotten to her more than she'd realized. It was highly unlikely there was someone following them. But just in case she'd make sure she was hyper aware of her surroundings today.

Zoe stood and put her phone in her back pocket. Rapping lightly on the bathroom door she called out to Kate. "You almost ready?" They had decided to sleep in and skip the International Rare Book and Fine Art Fair and head straight to the Urban Art Fair at the Carreau du Temple. Besides, it was really Craig's thing and it wouldn't be the same without him.

"Just a minute." Kate called back. Zoe could hear the banging behind the door as Kate tried to find space to put all her hair and beauty products in the tiny bathroom. It was times like this Zoe was happy she was most comfortable in jeans and a t-shirt.

Opening the door Kate playfully batted her eyes at Zoe and gave her a little pout. "How do I look? Très chic? Ready to take the art world by storm?"

"Oh my God, Kate!" Zoe couldn't help but laugh at her friend. "You do know we're going to be walking a lot today, right?" She glanced pointedly at Kate's heeled brown booties.

"Mm-hmm and I can still look smashing while doing it." Not having anywhere to move in the tight space Kate just looked her outfit up and down. "And that - " she slowly

wagged her her pointer finger at her. “is not happening tonight when we go to the clubs.”

Zoe was still grumbling her objections as they rode the elevator down to the lobby. She knew there was no use arguing with Kate and (not that she’d admit it to her) sometimes she didn’t mind when Kate helped her get ready. She knew at least she looked the part of wherever they were going and not having to think about it helped keep her anxiety low about choosing an outfit.

Sliding on her sunglasses Zoe pushed open the doors and stepped outside. With Kate by her side they made their way to a nearby vendor. They ordered their crepes and people watched as they waited for their food. Grabbing hers, Zoe smeared Nutella over the top of hers and sighed with pleasure as she took a bite.

This is heavenly, Zoe thought. She’d been looking forward to this taste since the moment she booked her ticket. There was nothing like the buttery, sweet taste of a crepe from Paris. It was the taste and the memory of days long past that came to mind as the sweet confection melted in her mouth. When she was young her parents would take her and her brother to this same hotel and they’d spend the weekend exploring Paris. Her mother had always loved it here.

Kate lightly touched her arm. “Hey, where did you go?”

Zoe abruptly pulled herself away from her thoughts, happy her sunglasses shielded her eyes. Looking up she blinked back her tears. There were times that memories of her parents were both happy and sad. “Nowhere.” She shifted away from Kate not wanting to talk about it. Pasting a smile on her face she asked, “You ready to go? It should only take a few minutes to walk to the Metro.”

Experiencing the Urban Art Fair was an event like no

other. Zoe loved examining all the different styles and ways the artists expressed themselves. There was so much to do they could have spent all weekend watching the live painting, film screenings, and digital experiences. She was a little sad when it was time to go.

As the sun dipped into its decent showering the sky with pinks, oranges, and yellows Zoe felt like she was being watched again. The feeling had been absent during the day and she'd almost forgotten about it.

Keeping with the crowd walking toward the Metro, Zoe kept glancing over her shoulder keeping a wary eye out for danger. Just before stepping on the train Zoe felt an irresistible urge to look up and locked eyes with a dodgy looking bloke at the other end of the platform.

She froze.

A person behind jostled Zoe and knocked her into Kate breaking her staring contest with the unknown stranger.

"What the heck Zoe?" Kate grumbled at her. "You almost made me fall arse over tit."

Zoe just blinked at her trying to clear her head. It felt strangely foggy. "Yeah, sorry about that. I lost my balance."

Over a late dinner Kate talked excitedly about going out that night. She was so excited she barely took a breath and certainly didn't register how quiet Zoe was. Which was fine with her, she still didn't know what to make of the last two days. While cautious, she wasn't typically a paranoid person. But she couldn't get that man out of her head, as crazy as it sounded she had a feeling he was the shadow man from their pictures.

Following Kate back to their room she let her doll her up and add all the beauty products she wanted. She tried to shake off the uneasy feeling but struggled to do so.

“Okay. Enough. Out with it, what the bleeding hell is wrong?” Kate demanded after finishing Zoe’s eye makeup.

Opening her eyes Zoe knew it was time. Even if she was crazy they both should be on the look out for that man in case he was a threat. Without a word she picked up her phone that lay on the bed beside her. She scrolled to their pictures at the Eiffel Tower and pointed to the shadow.

Kate shrugged. “I don’t understand.”

“The shadow is in all of them.” Zoe zoomed in. “And it looks like a man. I’ve also had a strange feeling of being watched since the catacombs.”

Kate’s head pulled away and her gaze filled with confusion. “It might be. it’s kind of hard to tell, but why didn’t you say something before now?”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought I was imagining it.”

Kate stayed silent.

“I don’t think I am.” Zoe looked at a point passed Kate’s shoulder and gave a little shudder remembering the incident at the Metro. “This afternoon before I bumped into you. A man. I think the same one was staring at us. I couldn’t look away until the person behind me shoved their way through.”

“Do you not want to go out tonight?” Kate asked. “If you don’t feel safe then we don’t have to go.”

Zoe knew how disappointed her friend was at the possibility of not going to the clubs. Kate loved the social scene and nightlife and she was doing a terrible job of hiding her true feelings. Zoe appreciated her at least trying to be okay about it for her sake.

“No. Absolutely not. We’ll just stay with the crowd and be aware. It might actually be nothing.”

Kate glanced at her not totally convinced.

“Really. I mean it.” She jumped up from the bed, grabbed

their purses and phones and pulled her friend to the door. "These sequins need a place to shine and this hotel room isn't going to cut it." Giving her friend a smile Zoe figured if she forced herself to act like nothing was wrong then maybe she'd start to believe it.

Leaving the hotel Zoe and Kate kept a watchful eye. As they neared the entrance to the Metro the crowd started to thin out a little. By the time they moved to go inside Zoe realized no one else was around. *That's strange*, she thought as she let Kate move ahead of her.

Putting her hand on the railing she felt a presence behind her when no one had previously been there. She squeezed her eyes shut as his hand brushed against hers. Zoe couldn't stop the shudder that ran through her body and took an involuntary step back. Without wanting to - and knowing she had to - she lifted her eyes to gaze directly into the eyes of the man from the platform.

Zoe could feel her eyes grow wide and the panic rush through her body. Her limbs felt heavy, but her instincts screamed at her to run. With difficulty she tore her gaze from his.

"RUN!" Zoe's warning startled Kate causing her ankle to twist and her legs go right out from under her.

On the ground Kate looked back at Zoe as terror filled her face. Zoe moved her body trying to put as much distance between her and that man. She stopped and yanked Kate up trying to drag her along with her. Their train should be here any minute. If they could just get to it they would be safe from him.

Gazing fearfully back at him Zoe noticed he hadn't moved. The wolfish grin that crossed his face made her heart skip a beat. Still moving, Zoe looked down at Kate who was trying to

move despite the grimace of pain that crossed her face with each step. It had to be only seconds, but the man crossed the distance between them with such surprising speed Zoe didn't have time to react as he grabbed Kate and threw her to the ground.

Hitting her head on the ground Kate's eyes fluttered closed.

"No!" Zoe screamed and tried to run to her friend. The man stood in her way. Her eyes frantically darted around the space trying to find anything she could use as a weapon to defend them.

Where the bloody hell was the Metro?

He grabbed her by the arm and lifted her as though she didn't weigh a thing. As though having fun, he tossed her a few feet away from him, laughing as he did it. Zoe stumbled and fell to her knees. *Is he toying with me?* As scared as she was the anger that began to course through her body was replacing the fear.

Before she could push herself to standing he was there by her side. After another evil grin while he turned his fist and backhanded her. Pain radiated down her head and jaw blinding her. She felt one more blow as she slid to the ground. Zoe blinked a few times realizing Kate's body was lying next to her. *Bollocks. We should've stayed in tonight,* was Zoe's last thought of regret as she lost consciousness.

chapter two

JD Salt

IT WAS THE COLD—a cold that made her bones ache—that finally convinced Zoe that she was not, what—dreaming, hallucinating, tripping on whatever the creep had shot into her veins.

She opened her eyes, ready to fight, expecting him to still be there; but there was only a thick, impenetrable darkness. She raised her hand, the muscles in her arm hesitant and sluggish, intending to bring it to her face and gauge the true extent of the dark. But her hand moved but six inches before it encountered some sort of heavy, plastic-like material draped over her body. She slipped her hand to the side and pulled, thinking it was a cover, but the object was trapped beneath her.

She reached up toward her face, only to discover that the covering went past her head. She felt the warmth of her breath reflected back against her nearly numb face as she reached behind her head, grabbed, and pulled. The fabric moved, six inches, then a foot—but then the material became taut, tugging against the back of her head. She pulled against

the other side, kicked her feet up against the bottom as her heart began to race. Her mind narrowed to a single, compelling thought: *Out. Now.*

Before she realized it, she was thrashing and clawing at the material, her mind racing alongside her breathing and her heart. She dug her in her nails, but the fabric refused to give.

Stop. StopstopstopSTOP! Her only chance was to calm herself and think.

She forced her hands under her butt and focused on slowing her breathing—deep breath in and contract her muscles, deep breath out and relax. She repeated the cycle for what she thought must have been a minute or more. Slowly, the edge came off the panic and she was able to think again, barely.

Zoe slid her hands out from under her body and ordered them to probe the fabric, slowly, searching for a zipper, a seam, a bunched place where an opening had been tied off. Just as panic threatened to flare again, she felt it—the distinct feel of a zipper, directly above her body.

She calmed as she followed the ridged metal trail toward her head, feeling for the bottom side of the pull—a zipper meant a way out. When she reached the end of the trail without success, she retraced her steps and continued toward her feet. As she came to the end of her reach, just past her knees, she ordered her body to sit up. Her abdominal muscles sparked and sputtered but refused to do her bidding.

She rubbed and thumped on her stomach. “Common, wake up.”

After a moment, she tried again, this time grabbing the back of her legs for leverage. Slowly, painfully, she managed to sit up. Her back and her hips were stiff from the cold and disuse and weren’t shy about stating their discomfort.

“Bloody hell. How long was I out?”

She regained the zipper, trying to re-orient herself to its changed position now that she was upright, then continued the search toward her feet. Just as she thought her nearly numb fingers must have missed the pull and she would have to retrace her path, her thumb nail caught on a raised bit of metal. She explored slowly, carefully—she’d found the smooth base of a large pull, two of them actually. Her heart raced, this time with excitement.

She grasped at the pull nearest to her, but her clumsy fingers could not find purchase. She cupped her hands to her mouth and bathed her fingers in warm breath. *If only it wasn’t so bloody cold.* And that begged the question: why was it cold? She couldn’t have been outdoors—it was the exact wrong month for it to be cold in Paris at all. And it seemed far too cold for air conditioning; was she in a cave somewhere? It wouldn’t matter if she couldn’t get out—she’d die from hypothermia.

After moment, she flexed her fingers. They tingled, somewhat painfully, but they moved with more dexterity. She found her way again to the zipper pull. This time, she found a surer grip, then she pulled. The fabric stretched nearly taut before the pull finally began to move. She drew the zipper past her head and pushed the material down toward her sides, freeing her body.

She found herself in a dimly lit room. A sparse series of small, faint lights ran, near floor-level, along the wall to her right. Directly opposite her, even fainter light trickled in through two smallish windows in a set of double doors that led to a hallway.

She could make out the base of a set of cabinets to her right, and irregular, vague shapes to her left—piles of linens to

be laundered, perhaps. She rubbed at her legs for moment, then pulled them free from the bag and swung them off the surface she had apparently been laying on. She had to get out of here and get help.

She pushed her self off and her feet found the floor. She shivered at the new assault of cold tile against her bare soles. She wrapped her arms around her body and shuffled to the doors. The corridor outside was wide and ran left to right. The light, which cast an eerie glow on the old, white-washed masonry wall opposite the doors, came from fixtures further down either end of the hall.

She saw no one, no hint of imminent danger. She felt for the handle of the door whose window she was looking through, pushed it down, then gently shoved—the door would not budge in the slightest. She repeated the task with the door's twin with the same result. She was locked in.

She would have to risk some light to find another way. She felt along the wall to the right of the door and discovered a switch plate with three switches. She risked turning one on. At first, nothing happened. But just as she was about to try the second switch an overhead bank of fluorescent lights began to flicker on. They sputtered, nearly going out, before flickering back to life again. She watched them until they shone steadily, although weakly given the cold.

Satisfied the lights would not cut out on her, she turned to survey her surroundings. As she took in the scene, she managed “Bloody ... fecking ... hell,” before the breath went out of her.

When she came back to her senses, she saw that she'd been laying on metal trolley. To her right were four similar trolleys, each set parallel to the doors, one behind the other, each bearing what was, without question, a white body bag. To the

right of the trolleys was a set of vaults or coolers, or whatever it was they called them, two rows of four one above the other. She'd seen enough crime shows to know exactly where she was—a mortuary, specifically the room where they stored the bodies.

“But that means ...” She looked down and noticed for the first time that her t-shirt and bra had been cut open, electrical leads dangling from numerous adhesive patches attached to her chest and abdomen. Medical tape dangled from the crook of her right arm, a bruise barely visible from where an IV line must have been inserted.

“Oh my Christ.” If she'd been brought here, was Kate with her as well?. She scanned the four trolleys for movement, but there was not so much as a stir. Bits of last night flashed through her mind—the creepy guy Kate had been talking to outside the club, the sudden attack, the sight of Kate's blood, the strong arm which held her still as he jabbed something into her own neck.

She felt panic rising again. She moved from body bag to body bag, checking the tag attached to the foot of each. At the last one, the one closest to where she'd lain, she read as far as “Fisher, K., U.K”, then yanked the zipper so hard she almost hopelessly jammed it midway. She worked the zipper loose, then, more cautiously, unzipped it the rest of the way. Kate lay there, eyes closed, in a similar state of undress.

But if she herself hadn't really been dead, that meant Kate couldn't be either. She fought against fear and revulsion as she held her fingers against the side of Kate's neck, feeling for a pulse, while the other hand shook Kate's shoulder, trying to rouse her. But she felt no pulse, and the only effect shaking Kate created was her head lolling to the side. Kate was dead, truly dead.

Grief mixed in with panic as the tears came. How could Kate be dead while she was still alive? How was she going to tell Kate's parents, who she'd never even met?

She had to get out of here, find someone, tell them Kate maybe really wasn't dead, that they'd obviously made a mistake with her, since she was very much alive, so why not Kate?

As she stepped away, ready to head for the door, she spied a clear plastic sleeve which contained medical paper work, with Kate's driver's license, hotel key card, and the bit of cash she was carrying.

Near the top of the top of the form she spied two words which made her shiver with disbelief:

"Overdose d'heroine"

"Overdose? This was murder!" She checked the form again, but the words refused to change.

If they were calling Kate an overdose, then what were they calling her own supposed death? She returned to her trolley and discovered her own plastic sleeve with similar contents and a similar pronouncement—the one difference: her phone was there. She shook her head, not comprehending.

Zoe retrieved her phone with the intention of calling ... who? What was the equivalent of 999 in Paris? The point was moot anyway—she had no bars. She ran to the door and began to scream for help, pounding on the glass, the kind with steel mesh inside. For ten minutes, she alternated between screaming and pounding, until her voice grew hoarse from the effort and her hands stung. But there was no change in the light from the corridor, no evidence that anyone had heard her pleas.

"Think, dammit, think!"

A mortuary, the darkness, all the bodies ... it must be the middle of the night, and, unless they had another cold room,

no one was going to bring anymore bodies here until they moved some out. She'd be waiting until morning, seven o'clock if she was lucky, but maybe not till eight or nine—it would be Sunday morning in Paris, after all. She would be dead from the cold by then.

She turned on the remaining lights, then rummaged through the cabinets, sparsely populated with those plastic sleeves, a stack of forms and a bundle of pens, tags and a box of short pieces of string, boxes of rubber gloves, a digital camera with a box of SD memory cards, and containers of disinfectant wipes. She slammed the last door in frustration—she would have to try to muscle her way out.

She pushed hard against the doors, but they would not budge. She took three steps and put her shoulder into the door, but her slim build made no difference. *Maybe the trolley would do the trick.*

She got behind her own trolley, angled it toward the center of the doors, then pushed off hard, imagining she was sprinting in the hundred meters at the Olympics. The trolley slammed into the doors—they shook but did not break. Six times, eight times, a dozen times she battered the door, each time with increasing rage. Finally on the thirteenth try, the doors gave way, spilling her into the hall, her body spent from the repeated effort and all the jarring impacts. Cold air flooded out around her, but the corridor was like stepping into the tropics by comparison.

When she picked herself up, she noticed the blood dripping on the floor—somehow, she'd cut the back of her hand, badly, during her final assault. She managed to slip off her sliced bra with her good hand then turn it into a makeshift bandage for her wounded hand. First aid accomplished, she returned to the cold room—she would check Kate one last

time, then get her own license, her shoes, and their collective cash, just in case.

Back in the corridor, Kate still dead, she took a right and followed the hallway until she came to a set of doors on each wall. She tried each knob until she found one that was unlocked. It opened into a locker room—she would at least be able to find a scrub top to go over her torn shirt, and hopefully a better option for her hand.

Half-an-hour later, she stepped out into the four-a.m. quiet of Paris. Her urge to call for help had been replaced by growing dread in the pit of her stomach, and a bone-deep weariness that sapped her will to do more than return to their hotel. She was in shock, or so she told herself.

She entered her location (they'd apparently been taken to the Hospital Hotel-Dieu, right near Notre Dame) into her GPS app, and the Radisson Blu as the destination, then hit "Guide Me There". If it wasn't for her phone, she would have simply laid down on the sidewalk until someone came along and took her away—she'd have no idea where to go otherwise.

More than an hour later, the eastern sky taking on the first hint of dawn's pinks and oranges, Zoe used her key card to slip through the side entrance of the Radisson, avoiding the front desk. Back in her room, she sat on her bed, the bed she'd shared with Kate to save on expenses for the trip, dazed and exhausted. She found her memories of the attack fading—a flash of a face, a glimpse of blood, pain, and then a falling into darkness. Or had that all been an illusion? Had they been slipped something? That's at least what the death forms seemed to indicate.

But she was too tired to figure it out. She needed the

cocoon of deep sleep, driven by exhaustion, by shock, by a confusion and grief that sought to overwhelm her. She kicked off her jeans and headed to the loo. She needed a wash and a look at her hand.

She turned on the light and sat on the toilet lid. The gauze was no longer seeping—maybe she wouldn't need stitches after all. But when she unwrapped the bandage, her heart caught in her throat—the blood had dried, but except for a thin pink line, the wound was gone. How was that possible? She pushed and pulled at the wound, but there was no mistake.

She shook her head, convinced she was delusional, and wrapped the hand with fresh gauze anyway. But when she stood from the toilet and turned to the sink to wash her hands, the blood drained from head so fast that she came within a hair's breadth of passing out. Whatever the creep had shot into her must have contained some kind of psychedelic—she could not see her reflection in the mirror.

But she didn't have time to process this latest surprise—in the midst of her numbness, Zoe's mind filled with a clear and compelling message: *Run. Now! Grab your things and leave!*

Dazed and bewildered, she had no choice but to comply. She grabbed her overnight bag with her toiletries, stuffed in her change of clothes, then retrieved their remaining cash and the credit cards from the safe. Before she knew what she was doing, she quietly slipped out the door and headed for the stairs.

chapter three

John Gray

HE SQUINTED AT THE scanned writing on his screen: Was it Ainsyot? Aumyot? Something else?

When his sister Zoe had decided to go to Paris for the weekend he had emailed her the “Craig Evans Paris Miscellany” - a rather scrappy compilation of the places he had enjoyed visiting over the years. He had got the impression that this weekend was (at least as far as her colleague Kate was concerned) not going to be about visiting sites of architectural or historical interest.

Thinking of Paris had, however, brought him back to a project he had put to one side (he knew he had always been easily distracted). He had been transcribing some of the scanned Paris diaries of Anne Lister, and with a historic map of Paris had been mapping them onto the modern street plan. He had a half-baked plan to improve the Miscellany into a self-guided walking tour (“Gentleman Jack’s Paris” perhaps), pointing out the places she stayed and visited and the things that she remarked upon: the gardens of M. Etienne; the *Bains Vigier*; Mr Carter the overpriced cutler of the Rue de l’Odeon

who spoke bad French and sold almost exclusively to English immigrants who read Galignani's Messenger, the English-language paper and, like the others advertising in it, probably overcharged the expats (*plus ça change!*).

So he had returned to transcribing the account of another day, and was struggling to interpret the name of a Parisian bookseller. Online searches of business directories had not yet helped identify the man even though he had an address.

Then the door intercom buzzed. He put his laptop to one side and got up. When he looked at the intercom, he saw a police officer.

"Mr Evans?"

"Yes, that's me"

"I'm from the Metropolitan Police - may I have a word?"

"Yes... certainly"

He buzzed her in and opened the door of the flat. His mind flitted over the things that they might wish to ask him about, but sending police to his door seemed a disproportionate response to most of them. He *had* heard some noise outside late last night but had ignored it (generally getting involved seemed to be more trouble than it was worth) but maybe he should have cared at the time. He sighed.

The officer had reached his landing.

"Hello, I'm PC Gerry Woolf. May I come in?"

He led her through to his lounge and invited her to sit.

"I'll come straight to the point, Mr Evans. I have some difficult news for you. We've been contacted by the French police about your sister Zoe Evans."

Immediately he wondered what Zoe had done that meant that they needed him to get involved, but he started to guess the truth almost as the officer started to explain.

"Your sister and her friend, Kate Fisher, have been found

dead in Paris. The police there are investigating because it is believed to be a crime of violence, but we can't say any more at present."

Craig just sat. He didn't howl with rage or pain, he didn't cry, he didn't slump in his seat as if he'd been punched - and then he felt guilty that maybe he should have reacted more.

"I see" he managed to say, then added "What should I do?"

"From a practical point of view, the French police would like you to go to Paris as soon as possible to confirm the identification, collect their possessions and possibly answer some background questions. The British Consulate in Paris ..."

He didn't recollect so much detail after that but knew he had assured the PC he would sort things out. She had stuck around until Jane got back from her choir, and when the PC had gone he found himself out-of-sorts on the sofa with a cup of tea, a business card for PC Geraldine Woolf, a booklet on bereavement and the name and number of "Rose Marchant" as a contact at the British Consulate in Paris.

Craig arrived on time at the Gare du Nord, where he quickly identified Rose Marchant by the sign she held.

"Mr Evans. Sorry to be meeting you like this. I'm Rose Marchant, do call me Rose"

"Please, you can call me Craig. So ..."

"I'll drive us to the IML, the Institut médico-légal, which is the public mortuary. I know this may be difficult but I'll try to provide what support I can."

They headed down the escalator to the car park.

"So can you tell me any more about what happened? The police were very vague when they came to tell me. They only

said that violence was involved.”

Rose looked uncomfortable.

“I’m afraid it all seems a bit unclear. There are strict rules around *sub judice* here so the details of post mortems aren’t routinely given out. Often the consulate will get some more information from the police but it hasn’t been forthcoming. I don’t know whether that’s because they’re concerned that giving away too much might alert someone...” She shrugged.

“Will there be a chance to ask someone at the mortuary? I was told the police might want to talk to me anyway.”

“I hope so. I believe that Lieutenant Bernard will be meeting us there - he’s the one I’ve been dealing with in the PP. I’ve told you all I really know.”

After a few more moments in silence they got into her car. As she started the engine and backed out of the space, she asked more gently “Were you close to your sister?”

“We’ve always been on good terms but for a while we didn’t see each other much. Five years ago when our parents died it brought us closer for a time. I think we’ve both moved on again now. We do keep in touch though. I last saw her about a fortnight ago.”

“Did you know she was in Paris?”

“Yes - she mentioned it, so I sent her some notes about things to see. But I’m not sure they were focussing on going to see the architectural sights.”

“You’re familiar with Paris?”

“I’ve been over many times for work - I’m an architect and our practice has a Paris office. I always tried to find new things to see whenever I was over. But this trip...”

She nodded. He remained silent as she skilfully navigated the traffic. When he looked out of the window, Paris seemed to have some kind of shadow over it. It certainly wasn’t the

same.

The Institut médico-légal occupied a sturdy redbrick building by the Seine, not far from the Gare de Lyon. Craig had been through the Gare de Lyon numerous times and while waiting to change trains he had occasionally wandered through the area around. He remembered the early morning as a student, bleary-eyed off an overnight coach that he'd walked through the Parc du Bercy, past the unusual grass-covered Arena and the striking canyon-like fountain to get to the station. He'd sat in the Gare de Lyon watching the roller-hockey players on the Place Henri Frenay. Somehow on these trips he'd never seen the IML building.

On another occasion he would probably have paid more attention to the architecture, the decor, the busts lining the hall... But this time the stress of the journey and the sense of dread for what he had to do blocked that appreciation. Rose invited him to take a seat in a waiting area while she spoke to the staff to let them know they'd arrived.

She came back after her brief conversation to tell him that someone was coming down to meet them. A few minutes later, a member of staff in a white coat, accompanied by a police officer, went to the counter. Someone gestured in the direction of Rose and himself; the voices were fast and hushed and his French wasn't up to understanding them. Then he noticed that Rose was sitting bolt upright, the blood drained from her face - presumably she had heard something that had shocked her. Perhaps it was as well that his French wasn't very good. She turned to him and as she did, her face flushed red as if in embarrassment.

"I think there's been a problem. There might be a delay. I'll find out."

Rose joined the small group in discussion and after a minute or so came back.

“If you’re prepared to identify Kate, your sister’s colleague, then we can go and do that now.”

“OK. But what’s the problem about identifying Zoe?”

“They’re being a bit cautious about saying what the issue is, and don’t want to cause any distress.”

“Is it... the nature of the injury?”. He shuddered at the thought.

“No, I discussed that with the staff before we came. There was no reason you couldn’t see... the deceased on that account. If we give them a few minutes they hope to sort it out.”

By this time another stockily-built man in a suit had joined the conversation. The man in the white coat shrugged and left again. One of the women from behind the counter came across.

“C’est prêt”, she said and also beckoned to the police officer. He strode over purposefully - slightly overweight but with an earnest, thoughtful air about him.

“Lieutenant Pierre Bernard.” He shook hands with Craig. “I’m sorry to have to meet you in these circumstances.” His English was fluent but slightly accented. Almost a cross between a Somerset accent and stereotypical French accent, thought Craig. He nearly laughed at this, briefly forgetting the reason he was there.

“Shall we go through? I only need you to confirm that Kate Fisher is someone you recognise.”

“Can you say anything about Zoe, about my sister?”

“I’m hoping we will have that resolved shortly. I think there may have been a miscommunication about the location ... of your sister’s remains...”

Craig felt his stomach lurch; he had steeled himself on the journey here for this moment and the prospect that he wouldn't get it over with now was hard.

"I hope to know more in a few minutes. Can I express my sympathy for this administrative issue?"

"OK," said Craig, "Let's at least do what we can.". Rose gently put her arm round his shoulder - he suspected that it was to help catch him if he fainted, not purely for his comfort.

The room was cool, with a faint perfume from a floral arrangement in the corner.

"Are you ready?" asked Rose gently.

"Yes, go on."

Lieutenant Bernard gestured to an attendant and a curtain was drawn back, revealing a body lying on a table behind a glass partition.

"Yes, that's Kate," Craig mumbled. She was recognisable - but the flat stare and lack of a smile were so uncharacteristic of her. He remembered a few years ago when Zoe and he had been invited to Kate's cousin Adrienne's wedding. He'd suspected they were all there to make up numbers as they both barely knew Adrienne. He remembered how Kate had pointed out various relatives and told hilarious stories of their foibles. How true these tales were, he didn't know. He remembered how Zoe had talked then about the power of family mythology; how important it was to have stories handed down in families or organisations, however ridiculous. He smiled, and then remembered that he'd never again hear Kate tell her tales. Or Zoe.

Perhaps the mistake meant that Zoe... no, that didn't make sense. They'd been absolutely convinced when they'd sent the police around, and Kate had been mentioned too.

"Do Kate's parents know?" he turned and asked Rose. He

had met them at Adrienne's wedding.

"We haven't been able to track them down. We've tried. The local police reported they weren't at home and a neighbour said the Fishers had asked them to keep an eye on the house but didn't leave any contact details. We're still trying."

Craig nodded. The curtains had been closed again and they headed back towards the waiting area.

"I will see if I can get any more information," said Lieutenant Bernard, indicating that Rose and Craig should take a seat.

"I'm sorry this has been less than straightforward," Rose said quietly. "We don't normally have these problems - it's usually very well organised."

Lieutenant Bernard came back over after a few minutes of discussion and phone calls.

"I'm very sorry to say this, but the situation is indeed difficult. The staff have checked the records and your sister was definitely taken here yesterday. However, when you arrived today and the staff went to the storage area to prepare for your visit, it appeared...". He looked nervous. "It appeared that the remains were not there."

Craig's mouth opened but he couldn't say anything.

"There are security systems," the officer continued, "which log the opening and closing of doors in the storage rooms which suggest that something happened last night. However, we see no evidence on the video recordings of anyone unauthorised in the building. There are some doors opened so we suspect tampering with the recording system."

"That... doesn't make sense!" said Rose.

"Obviously, we still have more to do in our investigation. I am not permitted to give any detail - but I would only observe

that the ... organisations able to defeat these security systems are sophisticated and very well resourced.” Seeing the shock on Craig’s face, he added “I should say though that we can’t see anything in your sister’s case that would suggest terrorism or organised crime.”

“So,” Craig mumbled as he started to feel dizzy, “you’re telling me that my sister’s body has been stolen.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s how it appears. But please be assured that we take this very seriously. Obviously in criminal cases, the remains are themselves vital evidence.” The last sentence was redundant as Craig had slumped across Rose Marchant’s lap.

When Craig came round he found himself laid on the floor, several concerned staff around him. He was offered a cup of water which he sipped from. His first feeling was intense embarrassment. He really shouldn’t be fainting all over the place. Gradually he was helped back up into a chair.

“I’m sorry - it was just the shock of it that did it. It’s been a long day,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry. Everyone understands that this has been a very difficult day for you,” Rose said. “I think it might be best for you to go somewhere to rest. Have you booked a hotel?”

“I have. And yes, maybe I do need to take it easy.” He thought for a moment, now that he was feeling more composed. “Do you still need me to take any personal effects?”

Lieutenant Bernard had returned again and heard the question.

“Normally, yes, we would invite you to collect any luggage. They were staying at the Radisson Blu Le Metropolitan and we had told the staff to expect your visit. However... in light of

the development we have sent officers to the hotel to place their room in 'quarantine' shall we say. I do not wish you to take this the wrong way, but I would like you to remain in Paris for a few days while we continue our investigation."

"Yes, certainly. I need to know what has happened."

Rose added, "Obviously the consulate will assist when we can. It will have to be someone else you deal with, as I'm on leave after today. I'm sorry it's worked out like that. Our rotas don't always help and we obviously hoped this would be a one-day case." Rose sighed. "But I can at least drive you to your hotel."

Craig gave her the name of the hotel and Lieutenant Bernard took down the details, along with Craig's mobile number. He felt lost and alone. He wished that Jane could have been with him through this but right now it was just him. "Paris is for lovers," went the song. At this moment it didn't feel the least bit romantic.

Somewhere out there was his sister's body. While he was in Paris, he told himself, he was going to have to deal with this. Paris would probably never feel the same again, and neither, he knew, would he.

chapter four

Kelsey McIntyre

ZOE HAD NEVER KNOWN this kind of night before. The streets of Paris were shrouded in shadow, but the darkness disintegrated like smoke under her gaze. She saw details at a glance. The dim alleys, the blackness under awnings, the unlit buildings—all revealed themselves to her as readily as if it were day.

The street lamps, on the other hand, were spots of fiery madness. She'd made the mistake of looking directly at them twice. Unpleasant experience. Would not recommend. To be fair, it's probably not great to stare at a lightbulb even if you're not a vampire.

Still, if the lamps were this bad, she hated to think what the sun would do to her when it rose. She had to find somewhere to stay before the night wore off.

She crossed the street to walk on a narrow sidewalk sheltered by a row of parked cars. Normally, if she had to find a place on short notice in a foreign city, she would use her phone, but this time that wasn't an option. She would have to get creative.

The sidewalk ended at an intersection, still busy with cars despite the late hour. A few pedestrians stood outside of a cafe farther down the block, its doors open and lights blazing within, but Zoe hesitated. *I can't just walk up and ask for directions. What if they notice something's wrong with me?* The average person's mind might not jump immediately to "vampire," but "pale dead-looking girl" wasn't much better. It might be better to avoid human contact as far as possible.

Far to her left, she heard something scraping across the pavement. It was darker in that direction, fewer lights, fewer restaurants. Two people were walking in the shadows, talking quietly, dragging a suitcase.

A suitcase. That was a good place to start. Suitcases sometimes lead to hotels. Even from this distance, Zoe's new eyes could make out that the people were wearing bulging backpacks. One of them held a phone, its screen glowing blue as it presumably offered them directions or an address. *Tourists?*

She followed, keeping her distance.

The suspected tourists walked in spurts, pausing ever once in a while to confer over the phone and point at various landmarks. The man held the phone, but the woman glanced around, sometimes looking behind her so that Zoe had to flatten herself up against the buildings or duck into an alley. The couple crossed a street, then turned down another. Finally, they stopped under one of the burning street lamps.

Zoe also stopped, shading her eyes. Were they lost? Was this their destination? To her horror, the people turned around in unison.

"We know you're following us!" the man yelled. He tugged off his backpack and unzipped it, glancing nervously from Zoe to the bag and back. His wife clutched his arm and rolled

the rolling suitcase in front of them like a barricade.

Zoe dove to hide in the nearest doorway. Obviously it was too late. They had seen her. But should she risk approaching? Maybe if she could explain that she meant them no harm, they could help. She was, after all, a petite young woman, the least creepy kind of stalker. *Well, technically I'm a petite young vampire, one of the most creepy kinds of stalkers*, she thought. *But they don't know that.*

She took a deep breath and stepped out from the shadows, hands up in surrender.

Both tourists jumped. "Stay back!" the man said, brandishing his backpack.

"I knew something terrible would happen on this trip," the woman squeaked.

"It's okay," Zoe said, "I just need directions—"

"I doubt that. Don't come any closer." The man frantically fished around in his bag, trying to find whatever he was looking for without taking his eyes off of Zoe.

"We can defend ourselves!" the woman shouted. "We're prepared for anything!"

"No, I'm not going to hurt you, I just—"

"Got it!" the man said, holding a small cylindrical container over his head in triumph.

Zoe could read the label, even in the dark. "Wait, is that *bear spray*?"

The man and woman high-fived each other hastily and then returned to attention. The man removed the bear spray cap. "It's a fresh can and I'm not afraid to use it."

The woman started ticking items off on her fingers, a crazy light in her eyes. "We brought matches, we brought a tarp, we brought maps of every continent. We've got it all."

"To *Paris*?" Zoe said, but then she shook her head. "Never

mind. I don't care. Please, I just need directions to a hotel."

The man lowered the can, just a little. He looked at his wife, and she nodded. "Fine, there's one just around the corner. We're going there now. But you'd better not follow us in there. Just wait outside until we're checked in. Or else..." He gave the can of bear spray a sinister rattle.

Zoe nodded. She felt a little better, strangely. It was nice to know she wasn't the most insane thing in Paris tonight. She waited until the tourists had backed their way around the corner (they watched her the whole time), and then gave them an extra three minutes to get situated inside the hotel before cautiously rounding the corner herself.

The Hotel de l'Arcade shone before her, a beacon in the night.

Zoe winced as her eyes tried to adjust to the hotel lobby. The cream-colored walls, floor, and furniture all blurred together. After the shadowy Paris streets this place was like crawling into the sun.

She crept to the front desk. "I need a room, please." Her voice came out grainy and unfamiliar-sounding, as startling as the brightness of the lights. She squinted at the hotel clerk, but all she could make out was a dark outfit and pale skin that blended in with the rest of the room.

"Of course, miss, and how many nights will you be staying?" It was a male voice.

"Er...four?"

"Four?"

"Yes, that sounds good, thank you." She slid one of her credit cards across the desk. *Act normal, don't make him think you're a vampire. Don't do anything a vampire would do.* She relaxed her squint and had to clench her jaw as pain shot through her exposed eyeballs.

The room slowly came into focus. Potted plants. Fireplace full of charred logs. Elevator. And across the desk, a man whose flesh radiated human heat and cloaked streams of living blood. *Wait—what? What was that? Creepy as all get out, that's what that was. Stop it.*

“Name, please?” the clerk said.

A jolt of panic ran through her. She couldn't use her real name; officially, Zoe Evans was dead. Unfortunately, after her run-in with the tourists, only one thing was in her head to use as an alias. “Bear,” she said. “It's—it's Bear. Beatrice Bear.”

No. Why.

The man glanced up from his computer screen.

It's like I'm some weird storybook character.

He arched one eyebrow, ever so slightly, and clicked something on the computer.

You know, Beatrice, the cute stuffed bear no one mentions in the children's books. Because she's a vampire.

Zoe cleared her throat. “Yes, it's spelled B-e-a-r-r-e.” That was better. Hardly suspicious at all now. Way to recover.

“Thank you, Ms. Bearre. Here is your room key. Enjoy your stay.”

Zoe let out her breath and seized the key that he had placed on the counter. “Thank you so much.”

She saw no one else on the way to her room, which was another relief. Maybe things weren't so bad. She could figure this out. Maybe there was a way to recover from the whole terrible weekend.

The hotel room was beautifully dark. Zoe left it that way and locked the door behind her. Suddenly in a rush, she fumbled to set the room key on the bedside table, pull the quilt off the bed, and stuff one of the faux fur throw pillows under her elbow. As she turned, the pillow caught the edge of

a decorative pot of orchids and swept it off the table.

Her hand had closed around the flowers, halting their descent, before she even realized her arm had moved.

Human Zoe would have broken the flower pot and trodden through the dirt. She probably would have trodden through it several times before noticing what had happened.

These were definitely not her native reflexes.

Don't think about it, you'll freak yourself out. You're already freaked out. She stumbled to corner of the room farthest from the door and sat on the ground with her knees drawn up to her chest. The quilt was big enough to form a cave when she draped it over her head. A cave of darkness. Just what she needed.

Everything will be better in the morning, she told herself, massaging her forehead with her palms. Well, maybe not in the morning. Because dawn. And sunlight. Morning was actually going to make things much, much worse.

But after that, without a doubt, everything was going to be fine.

chapter five

B Morris Allen

THE LIGHTS OF THE Rue Chauveau Lagarde snuck past the beige and black curtains of the Hotel de l'Arcade and straight into her eyes. *Green eyes*, thought Zoe, holding them closed. *Green*, she told herself, trying to ignore a slight tinge of desperation. *Aren't they?*

They'd been green last time she'd seen them in a mirror. Yesterday. The day before? She wasn't certain of anything anymore. Green eyes, though. She'd always had green eyes. Kate had been envious of them. 'Green as the ocean, green as the moss,' she'd said, though those were two different greens.

And now? Kate was dead, lying on a slab somewhere. And Zoe had no eyes at all, for all the mirror had to show. No body, for that matter. Yet here she was, a too soft matterss sagging under her invisble body and streetlights sneaking into invisible eyes. And thirsty.

She tried not to think about it. Not to consider the four times she'd already gotten up to drink glasses of slightly musty tap water, the two times she'd already had to pee. The fact that through it all, glass after musty glass, she'd still been thirsty.

Was still thirsty. And not for water.

Don't think about it. Think about ... Katie? Remembering the attack only made it worse. Had the attacker been just as thirsty? Just as – she shuddered to admit it – desperate? It wasn't even thirst anymore, it was agony. She could feel it, starting in her belly, radiating out through her body like mycelium under evergreens. Reaching, reaching, drawing out the moisture and leaving a body of humus prickling with stiff needles and the dried up bones of roots.

She scrunched up her eyes, drew the pillow over her head. It didn't help. The light snuck in. The light of the street, of the city. A city full of people. Of moisture. Of fresh, rich, slightly salty, –

“Augh!” She sat up, the pillow flying off into a corner. It brushed the curtain, and a little angle of light came in. It didn't really matter. It wasn't the light that was keeping her awake. She considered trying the TV again, looking for late night porn to distract her. But the closest thing they had was the Fashion Channel, and it wasn't sex she wanted. A man, yes. Or a woman. Even ... *No!* She had to have standards. No matter what had happened. What she was now. What she was going to do.

She got up, dressed deliberately. Her old soft jeans that Katie made fun of. *Had* made fun of. The T-shirt she'd been wearing. She tried not to think of what she left unexamined, the things she'd just learned about herself – the fact that she *was* going out, that she hadn't called the police, hadn't called the front desk for a wooden stake, hadn't looked up all night Italian restaurants for suicide *aglio olio*. The fact that she'd already mapped out a route to the Champs Elysee that didn't pass the church of the Madeleine.

If she hadn't felt so parched, so dry, she'd have cried. It

didn't matter that, for all she knew, garlic and crosses had nothing to do with ... *with vampires*, she admitted, standing in front of the mirror and looking at emptiness. She wasn't the kind to sacrifice herself, or even to take chances. She was the kind to feed of others. Given the need, the circumstances, she hadn't thought twice. Somewhere, while she'd lain there, pretending to be thirsty, to be *human*, she'd crossed a line. She was a vampire. Vampires drank blood. And she was thirsty. Very, very thirsty.

She'd worried about how to sneak out of the lobby, with its bright lights and its smirking, watchful desk staff. What must she look like, she wondered? Was she gaunt and pale? Did she have fangs protruding past wine-red lips? Was her T-shirt really a cape? But her teeth felt normal, and her jeans looked just like jeans, and in the end, she'd just walked out. Beyond their usual disdain, the staff hadn't given her a second glance. The street was empty, the pizza place – *full of garlic* – across the way closed up for the night.

She turned the corner, headed southwest. One block, two. A taxi went by, a fare in the backseat. A couple, and she watched them hungrily as they passed, two men who ignored her, but whom she could almost smell through the open window, a pair of young shoulders, a long soft neck...

Down the next street, a bar was open near the US Embassy on the corner. Young people spilled out onto the sidewalk, and she watched as she drew nearer. But there were too many, the bar too bright. *Maybe diplomats*, she thought. *Maybe trouble*.

But they smelled good, and she hovered on the edges until a woman in a dress too young for her – *Do we sell that one?* – wandered over a little too casually.

“Est-ce que tu cherche quelqu'un?” the woman asked.

French. Safe. “Meeting someone?” she asked again. Not French. She had an accent of some kind. Something Balkan, maybe.

“No. No. Just...” the answer trailed off. Because she was, wasn’t she? And this woman... She was alive, healthy enough, a bit plump – juicy, even. A nice brownish, well cooked color. “Maybe,” she said, looking down in a way she thought might be coquettish. “Are you... are you here alone?”

“I could be.” The woman looked her over, took in her comfortable clothes, her hair. “Yes, I think I am.” She held out a hand. “Victoria.”

Zoe took the hand. It felt nice, soft. Fleshy. It smelled of jasmine.

“Are you going to kiss it?” Victoria asked, amused, and only then did Zoe realize her head was poised over the woman’s hand, her lips slightly parted, her tongue just past her teeth. Were they longer? Sharper?

She pushed the hand away, off balance. “I don’t... I wasn’t...” But Victoria’s eyes were smiling, maybe winking.

“Come with me,” she said, and tucked Zoe’s arm into hers, pulling it just a little too close, a little too firm against her breast. “I was just leaving. And such a lovely night. Do you know the Champs Elysee? Just nearby here.” She chattered as they walked. She was Moldovan, it seemed. From a place called Cimislia. Something like that. And all the way, Zoe could think only of the blood coursing through the woman’s arteries. Fresh, red blood.

By the time they reached the corner, with its pillbox of French gendarmes, and its lights for American cameras, she could barely walk for need. “Come,” she said, speaking at last, and drew Victoria across the avenue and into the park.

It was surprisingly easy, in the end. Victoria was slighter than she looked, or the hunger had made Zoe stronger. She came along willingly enough, though, pushed along by Zoe's arm around her waist. In the dark under the trees, Victoria turned her head up, exposing that lovely, soft neck.

Zoe's teeth bit in, the edges cutting through skin like candy floss, until the blood spurted out in a thick rich spray, coating her tongue, the roof of her mouth, the back of her throat. It left sticky smears on her lips as she sucked, savoring the rich umami copper of flavor. Only a mouthful, two, and the pain subsided. She could almost feel her flesh filling in, the cells no longer shrunken and dry but full and vibrant. Alive.

Alive. With a start, she came back to herself. One hand over Victoria's mouth, one holding her up effortlessly as the body went limp. Alive. But how much longer?

She hesitated, the rich, voluptuous taste of blood still on her lips. The woman might die. Perhaps she was already close. How much blood was too much? If the woman was near death, perhaps it wouldn't hurt –

Victoria. The woman's name was Victoria. Moldovan. From Cimisia. You could donate half a liter of blood. Five pints in a body. Something like that. They'd said that at uni, on blood drive days. She couldn't have drunk a half liter. No more than a liter, anyway. Not five.

Standards. She'd promised herself standards. And she was sated now. Not full, but satisfied. She wasn't a killer. Needn't be a killer. She sucked hard once more, and raised her head. Victoria lolled in her arms, the wound on her throat a neat scrape, the flow of blood already slowing. *Like a mosquito or something*, she thought. Or the reverse – making wounds heal up. She should go to America, she thought with a giggle. One of those tent revival things. *Sinners! Come and let me heal you with*

the teeth of God!

She lay the woman – Victoria – down on the grass of the Champs Elysee. Still breathing. She looked innocent that way, her too short, over-tight dress almost flattering. Zoe straightened her legs out. She'd be safe enough, here, she told herself doubtfully, with the Embassy close by. Unless a werewolf came by. She giggled again. Was blood an intoxicant? All the time she'd wasted on martinis and wine, and it turned out everyone was full of drugs already.

She could stay here, perhaps, just to keep Victoria safe. Maybe have a little taste or two, if she needed it, if the effect of the blood was short lived. Yes, just a taste. Maybe now, before the wound closed up entirely, while the blood was still running.

She looked off to the side, toward the embassy, though no guards had come running, no one had shouted. The gendarmes were hidden behind the trees, and behind them, to the east, the sky was just starting to lighten, the dark of night just softened by the coming dawn.

Dawn! She straightened, the warm flush of fresh blood turning to chill in a moment. Dawn meant sunrise, and sun meant ... she wasn't sure what, but she'd already determined she wasn't a risk taker. And in all the movies, sun and vampires meant pain and burning.

With a last, rueful look, she turned her back on Victoria, and set off across the park. She went the long way across the park, past the pavilion and across the avenue until she could turn the corner of the Rue de l'Elysée. There, with her long hair streaming out behind her like the soft silk wings of a golden fox, she set out running for the hotel and safety.

chapter six

ASH

FIRE SURROUNDED ZOE. IT was heat and flames everywhere she looked. Yet the fires didn't burn, and her skin remained ever cool, just as she had risen from the slab. She was not alive, but her senses were lying to her. The hotel was fine. The clean walls were covered in sunlight, not fire. It wasn't direct, as she'd drawn the curtains, and the west side of the room was a wall, but there was ambient sunlight all the same. Though it didn't shine directly on her, she knew for a certainty that it would kill her should she climb to the roof and bid that mass of burning gas adieu. So she laid in bed, watching the wall turn orange as the divine furnace knob switched off.

Surrounded in dark, she felt only the cold. She wrapped herself in the blanket, tossing and turning until she felt wrapped in a cocoon. It didn't help. She was still cold. The chill went right to her bones, but curiously, she didn't shiver, nor did she really feel uncomfortable. Simply put, Zoe wasn't alive. Being dead and cold was simply naturally unnatural. No blankets would warm her veins, only the blood of flesh. She thought back on her feeding, and the memory brought the sun

into her heart. In the feeding she was warm in a way that demanded continual satisfaction. She remembered the thick wetness on her lips and ran her hands over her body. Blood was what she needed – warm, glorious blood, pumped into her.

Zoe turned on the lights and took a long shower.

Dressed and civil, the displaced tourist was at a loss. She wanted to go out and be among the people, but worried that she might hiss like a cat the moment she smelled garlic. The possibility was unacceptable. She was a vampire, an immortal vision of beauty destined to be one with the moon and her never ending cycle of darkness. Being seen running from aqueducts was out of the question. No, as a proper lady without a pulse, Zoe needed to be aware of her limitations. The myths of old would tell her what was and wasn't possible. If vampires are real, they must've been around during the ancient times as well; as such, the historians would tell Zoe how to behave.

Without a doubt, the most important unanswered question was how to spell the word. Was Zoe now a vampir or a wampir? Was she in fact a dhampir? There was no way to tell. She was at the mercy of her own suppositions. The myths were varied in their interpretations, saying that she could and couldn't cross running water. She found more information about how to prevent the formation of a vampire than how one is created in the first place. When all was said and done, Zoe lost nearly two hours to the bloodless endeavour.

There was, of course, another way to find answers, but she had not only her death to consider, but her social standing! Paris was an old city, world renowned for not only its cuisine, but its place in fashion. Knowing that vampires existed, Zoe couldn't shake the truth that the *crème de la crème* of

vampiric society lived here. If they saw her bumbling about and staring at empty reflections, they'd never let her into their secret clubs and forbidden bordellos.

Now that Zoe had accepted her vampiric predilection, she couldn't help but consider her place in the world of fashion. Surely, vampires of the modern age didn't walk around with collared capes and canes. Perhaps if they did, they were all crowded around castles in Transylvania. No, more common was the idea of covering oneself with black leather and red velvet, emulating the gothic aesthetics of the nineties. Vampires that did cultivate this air of gothic reverence surely stood out in the modern age. There was no place for the dark-loving iconoclasts of 2019, and surely not in Paris. If she was going to fit in, she needed to find a dark master to show her the ropes.

The search for Carmilla began innocently enough, wandering the streets of Paris looking for salons that catered exclusively to women. This was how she ended up in *La Champmesle*. It was a quaint little place with forgettable music, overpriced drinks, and disco balls, but it was too private to abduct someone without getting noticed. Zoe tried to imagine the fictional Carmilla stalking the club for young impressionable women, and everything felt wrong. However, it was here that Zoe met Marie.

Marie was a shorter, tanned version of the runway models. Her neck was long and elegant and simply radiated with life. Power emanated from the corded muscles of her bare arms. The tendons of her ankles became taught when she held herself aloft. Marie noticed Zoe's eyes, and beckoned her towards the dance floor. Zoe couldn't refuse. It was only polite. Zoe couldn't help but be demure when she joined her in dance. Marie's warmth radiated through the air, the very

beat of her heart urged Zoe to close the distance. She couldn't stay away for long, and soon Zoe could feel the pulse of her on her skin. Sense kept her head vertical, but it was a fleeting victory. Every sway of Zoe's head gave her an excuse to move closer to Marie. *It's only natural*, Zoe thought, *there's nothing strange about bringing my head closer. It's just the music.*

But Marie picked up on Zoe's motions and moved to intercept, skillfully moving with Zoe to keep their eyes level. The woman became bolder, touching Zoe's arms, shoulders, and hips. Everything Zoe wanted was denied her, but the warmth of the woman's skin kept her desires at bay. *Soon*, the woman's body promised. Yet it was Marie's face that came closer to Zoe, and her smile, though attractive in its way, did nothing to warm Marie's heart. The kiss came slowly. It was part of the dance, something that Zoe was supposed to enjoy.

Her hands were gentle as they ran up Marie's arms, but the feel of Marie's neck awoke something primal. Zoe's finger wrapped firm around the skin, the pads of her fingers touching the bumps of her spine. With each curl of her fingers, Zoe wanted nothing more than to keep that neck rigid in her hand, but she kept steady. She was in control even as her thumb found the end of Marie's jaw. Zoe wasn't a monster; she was a woman dancing, and enjoying that dance with a kiss. There was life in that kiss, the faintest bit of moisture on the tongue. Marie's mouth tasted of alcohol, and some delicious coppery flavour Zoe couldn't place. Her canines extended.

Zoe pulled back from the kiss too fast. Marie was smiling at her, a tempting blush on her cheeks. With a tilt of her head, she lead Zoe to the tables. The woman ordered a drink. Zoe got a beer. There was nothing in the cold liquid. It was worse than sour milk on her tongue, and she nearly gagged spitting it

out. Marie laughed but got her something to clean up the mess. It was easy enough to play off, claiming the liquid went down the wrong pipe, but the truth of it was plain: the beer gave her no sustenance.

Marie wanted to know who Zoe was, what she did, and how long she was there, but Zoe only had lies for the woman. Though Marie wanted Zoe, sense warned her about jumping into a meaningless fling. All Zoe had to do was convince Marie to come back to her hotel and... *What am I doing?* Zoe's hand froze on her thigh. She was supposed to be looking for vampires, trying to find a mentor to teach her the ways of the supernatural world. Marie didn't fit into that plan. *Why did I kiss her?* Zoe excused herself to the restroom.

The faucet let out steam, but her hands didn't burn, nor did the veins inside feel heat. There was only cold in Zoe now that Marie was so far away. She splashed her face and ran her hands over her eyelids. She wanted the cold to end. Marie could help her. *I'm not a monster.* But when Zoe looked in the mirror, she didn't see a scared woman. She didn't see an uncertain graphic designer in way over her head. Point of fact, she didn't see anything but the wall. Zoe closed her eyes and ran her fingers over her face. She could see herself as a blind person did; all she needed to do was put the parts together. It was a smile that twisted her lips. Arousal curved her brows.

Zoe needed answers, not more blood. Even if she killed the woman, how would she hide the body? She couldn't throw her into the river without drawing suspicion. Sure, there was that building being renovated by her hotel, but hiding the body there wouldn't work forever. *I need answers.* Ever since Kate died, she'd been so lonely. Zoe hadn't even had time to grieve, not really. Kate was a great friend. She would've been an amazing vampire, a partner to help Zoe survive the afterlife.

The easiest way to find out what killed a vampire was to sire a vampire herself. Making Marie immortal wasn't murder, not really.

"Your shirt's still wet." Marie pointed to Zoe's shirt when she got back.

Zoe twisted the shirt and squeezed. "Better?"

Laughing, Marie nodded. "Very classy."

Zoe sat down close enough for the woman to bring her hand over her back.

"You said you're only in town for a few days?"

"I might be gone tomorrow." Zoe looked over the patrons. The place wasn't crowded in the slightest. "I think I should probably head back to the hotel. I don't want to lead you on."

Marie looked from her purse to the door. "It's late, you shouldn't walk back alone."

Zoe stood. "You sure?"

Marie picked up her purse. "You never know who could be in the shadows."

On the way out, Marie held the door open for Zoe. She was smiling. Now that their night would come to an end soon, neither woman could find the words to continue their conversation. That kiss still lingered in Zoe's mind. She took Marie's hand and felt the warmth inside. Marie was full of warmth, a boundless supply that she shared effortlessly. All it took was a touch to kindle the flesh inside Zoe.

"You're so cold," Marie noticed.

"I always forget my jacket," Zoe laughed.

Marie put her arm around Zoe. "Better?"

Zoe kissed her cheek. "Much."

Their pace slowed.

"Would you want to live forever?" Zoe asked.

"Who wouldn't! I paint whenever I have the time. I think

about my work hanging in galleries centuries from now, little children and would-be painters studying my brush strokes and admiring the work I did. To me, that's living forever." Marie was wistful until she had the wherewithal to be self-conscious. She looked to Zoe and chuckled. "Sorry. It's silly, I know."

"I don't think it's silly. I think it's beautiful. I bet you're a wonderful painter."

Marie nodded. "I hope so. Sometimes it feels like I'm just throwing things onto a canvas."

Zoe remembered sketching at uni. The march of time passing around her as she dreamed of making some grand impact on the world. That brought back the arguments about the futility of her field and the rejection email from the gallery. She could smell the acrylics like it was yesterday. It still seemed wrong that her fingers were so clean, but there was no ink in graphic design.

"Hey." Marie stepped in front of her. "You okay?"

Zoe pulled Marie in for a kiss and the woman responded immediately. Her hands were on Zoe's face, her form pressed into her. She took such deep breaths that Zoe felt like they were her own. That sweet copper taste was still strong in Marie's mouth, undiluted by the liquor. Zoe didn't want the kiss to end, but knew it must. Her fingers struggled to stay calm on her fabric. Zoe ended the kiss this time. She stepped back enough to look Marie in the eyes and told her, "give me something to remember."

Marie bit her lower lip, but nodded. "Where's your hotel?"

"Too far," Zoe lied. She motioned to the scaffolding behind Marie. Though the building was boarded up, the inside was a mass of debris. "We could go inside."

"I don't think so."

Zoe walked up and tore a plank off the window as easily as

ripping off a band-aid. She smiled at Marie and they walked onto the debris. There was dirt and the heavy smell of ash all around them. Marie took out her phone and shone a light on the burned bits of the room. There was a tarp laid over a pile of junk. Zoe stopped her just short of the tarp, kissing the side of Marie's neck. Marie turned to kiss her back. *Not this time!* Zoe pulled her arm back, tilted her neck, and bit.

Warmth poured down Zoe's throat, and spread like fire over the dry kindling of her innards. The warmth brought life back to her. She was ablaze and shivered from the intense pleasure wracking her body. Zoe felt everything from the soft folds of Marie's top, to the draft of the air. *Just a little bite.* She eased off the wound, but the precious blood escaped Zoe's lips. She licked at the drops but more of the fluid rolled over her clavicle. There was no stopping the blood. No matter how much she licked and sucked, Marie continued to bleed. It was a waste to do anything but feed. *She'll be reborn. It's okay.*

Zoe was thorough. She blocked off the entrance, made sure no light was escaping the burned interior, and waited. Marie looked every bit as beautiful in death. Her long limbs were pale and angelic, but they didn't move. Zoe went through Marie's pictures over a dozen times, studying the woman's art from the pictures on her phone. Her paintings lacked a focus as the woman drifted from style to style. Some were playful, others riddled with angst, but there was no consistency in her form. As the hours went on, Marie's skin only got colder. Every bit of blood had been licked off and she was left a hollow corpse, a pathetic bit of modern art too *avant garde* even for Paris. Yet, in her final moment, Marie was at last consistent, beautiful, and inspiring.

"I will remember you," Zoe vowed.

Yet her work wasn't done. Now that the woman was dead,

Zoe needed to hide her. They wouldn't appreciate the beauty of Marie, they would only look for her murderer.

Back at the hotel, washing blood and soot off her skin, Zoe noticed how Marie's warmth stayed with her. *Marie's a part of me.* The thought comforted Zoe. Maybe she hadn't learned everything about vampires, but she learned that it took more than a bite to create one, and that was progress. For one, it meant that her undead sire, whoever they were, chose to make Zoe something more. *I'm special.* She tried to think back on the attack, to remember their names, but she couldn't even remember their faces, nor even their voices. When Zoe thought about it, she'd been having trouble recalling facts and details from even the night before. *Do vampires forget everything, or is it only me?* Zoe could feel the warmth of the shower fading. Blood was cooling in her veins. Marie wouldn't be remembered, not even by her. The woman's death was as pointless as Kate's. Zoe learned one more thing about vampires that night. She learned if they could cry.

chapter seven

Douglas DiCicco

IT WAS NOW CLEAR to Zoe that she needed help. The monsters that killed Kate and transformed her into this monstrosity hadn't had the courtesy to leave her with any kind of instruction manual about her new condition. Given how their encounter was gone, she wasn't at all inclined to try to track them down in search of answers. Even if she had been, she had no idea where to begin looking. She certainly wasn't about to wander into the streets of Paris at night again without some sort of plan.

The question was, where could she go for help? The first notion that popped into Zoe's head was to call the police, but she dismissed that thought almost immediately. She didn't know what the protocol was when a woman reported dead and shipped to the city morgue showed up at a precinct claiming to be a vampire, but she had a very strong feeling that it wouldn't end well for her. Best case scenario, she'd end up in some sort of psychiatric facility. Worst case, a cell. Both seemed dangerously likely to end with Zoe being exposed to the sun at some point, and she was far from confident about

how that might go in her vampiric state.

Of course, that could just be nonsense. Zoe tried to think back to when she'd read *Dracula* in high school. Dracula's lack of a reflection was one of the book's first clues to his true nature. The delicious coppery taste in her mouth was proof enough that the thirst for blood had a basis in fact. Could the rest of it be true? Deadly sunlight, a weakness to wooden stakes and fire, aversion to garlic, crucifixes, running water, and all the rest? What if there were other vulnerabilities that popular fiction hadn't mentioned? Far from seeing herself as a powerful immortal mistress of the night, Zoe now felt dread and uncertainty about so many previously mundane items, as if deadly danger could suddenly appear from any innocuous object. The sense of danger added urgency to Zoe's need for answers.

Having ruled out the police, Zoe took a look through the classifieds of the newspaper the hotel staff had left outside her room. The search felt aimless and foolish, as she still lacked a clear idea of what she was looking for. A priest? A scientist? Some sort of freelance cryptozoologist? She was far from certain that such people actually existed, much less that they would advertise their services in the classifieds of a randomly selected Parisian newspaper. Then her gaze fell on an advertisement which managed to hold her attention.

LOUIS RAYMOND

Déetective

Parle Anglais

Heures d'ouverture 4pm - minuit

Consultations gratuites

451 Rue Favart #103

Zoe's French was far from fluent, but she felt reasonably certain that 'détective' meant 'detective'. A detective who spoke English, had unusually late office hours, and offered free consultations seemed like the best prospect she'd come up with so far. A private detective seemed likely to have seen some strange things in their line of work, particularly one in the habit of working such unusual hours. Part of Zoe still felt uneasy about reaching out to someone about her bizarre circumstances, but a larger part of her felt there was no other choice. She needed answers, and she needed them now.

Zoe put down the paper and looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was quite late, but there was still enough time to visit the detective's office before it closed for the night. She remembered passing Rue Favart on the way to the Hotel de l'Arcade. It was close enough to walk there, even if the thought of being out in the streets of Paris after dark was still rather terrifying. She had no better options.

Zoe spent a moment trying to make herself presentable before leaving the hotel. Her lack of a reflection made this normally routine task into a frustrating ordeal. Her hair felt alright, but without any way to visually check it could easily be a horrifying mess. All the female vampires she could recall seeing in movies and on television always had such long black hair. How on Earth did they manage it without reflections? Perhaps they were just constantly in the salon.

As she put on her coat and gathered her things, Zoe wondered whether she even looked the same any more. Was she now a black haired, pale skinned creature of the night, like those movie vampires? What about her eyes? Were they still green, or had they turned into some eerie unnatural color, like blood red or shimmering violet? Zoe imagined someone would have reacted if that had happened, but she also

supposed they might have just thought she was going through an intense goth phase and had purchased novelty contact lenses.

These thoughts could only distract her from her fears for so long as she once again took to the streets of Paris at night. The city felt noisy and foreboding. Every footstep echoed ominously in the alleyways around her, unnaturally loud. Zoe wondered whether her hearing had become supernaturally acute, or whether she was just unusually alert due to the adrenaline rush of her near death experience.

This begged the question of whether transforming into a vampire qualified as a near death experience. Wasn't it just a death experience? Did she even have adrenaline anymore? If she did, would it affect her like it had in life? These questions haunted Zoe during her entire walk to the office at Rue Favart, but by the time of her arrival she had no more answers than she had possessed when she had set out. At least Zoe's musings had distracted her from her fears of the monsters that lurked in the city at night.

The address from the newspaper led Zoe to a cramped little office building, the kind of place favoured by professionals with minimal needs and matching budgets who favoured function over form. The front door was unlocked. It led Zoe into a cramped hallway and a room with a few old chairs and a reception desk. The desk was unstaffed, and there was no sign of anyone else in the room. Zoe briefly wondered if she had arrived too late, but she could hear someone moving around further inside. She followed the sound to a door with a frosted glass window, and the words "LOUIS RAYMOND" printed on it. Zoe took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

The sounds of movement stopped. A deep voice called

from within. "Entrez." The pronunciation was better than Zoe's, but she could still detect a trace of an accent. American, maybe? Zoe took the invitation and opened the office door.

The man seated at the desk inside was not what Zoe had pictured. In her mind, private detectives were all thin, intense men in overcoats and fedoras, clones of Humphrey Bogart perpetually drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes. The man she'd come to meet looked more like someone who had just stepped off the pages of a fitness magazine. Tall, with short black hair, clean shaven, possessing the build of a man who spent as much time in a gym as he did in his home. Under different circumstances Zoe might have thought of him as handsome, had he not been at least ten years her senior. "Louis Raymond?" She asked, stepping inside.

"Oui." The detective answered, leaning forward and gesturing to an uncomfortable-looking and weathered gray couch in front of his desk. "Que puis-je faire pour vous?"

"Your ad said you spoke English?" Zoe asked hopefully as she settled down onto the uninviting couch.

"Oui. I mean, yes." He answered. Zoe still couldn't quite place his accent. Definitely not French, but definitely not English either. "What can I do for you?" He added, translating his earlier question.

Zoe didn't know quite where to begin. "Monsieur Raymond-

"Just Raymond, please." The detective interrupted her. His expression was tired, grim. In this respect, he was more like the kind of detective Zoe had been expecting.

"Alright, Raymond." Zoe replied, then froze for a moment. Where to begin? What was she even doing here? How could she possibly explain the situation without sounding like a complete lunatic?

"Why don't we start with your name?" Raymond prodded, quickly picking up on Zoe's hesitation and discomfort. This question only caused further anxiety for Zoe. She was, after all, still likely considered dead in the eyes of Parisian law enforcement. She considered giving the same fake name she'd used to check in to the Hotel de l'Arcade, but ended up thinking the better of it. If Raymond was going to help her, she needed to be honest with him. Besides, she vaguely recalled a detective movie with a woman who'd given Humphrey Bogart a fake name, and that had ended rather badly for her.

"Zoe. Zoe Evans." She answered. Raymond nodded, typing the name into an empty file on the boxy desktop computer sitting in front of him.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss Evans. What has you looking for a detective so late in the evening?" Zoe was still hesitating. She looked uncomfortable, squirming in her seat and avoiding eye contact. Raymond had some experience with uncomfortable clients. His office was not a warm and inviting place, and people rarely came to detectives for assistance with happy and pleasant matters. He was going to have to prod a little. "Is it an issue with your boyfriend or husband?" It usually was, but this didn't seem to get Zoe talking. Raymond moved on to other guesses. "Family? An employer? Have you been the victim of-"

"I think I'm a vampire." Zoe blurted out. She hadn't meant to be quite so direct, but letting Raymond continue to guess didn't seem like it would ever lead him to the right answer. Raymond maintained a mask of cold professionalism, but inwardly he was suppressing a sigh. He'd been hoping for a new paying client, but this young woman was clearly either playing some sort of bizarre joke on him or was having some

sort of psychological crisis. Either way, this seemed doomed to end with a referral to a mental health professional for Zoe and no paycheck for Raymond.

"And what makes you believe you are a... vampire, Miss Evans?" Raymond asked, trying his utmost to keep a straight face.

"I'm not crazy." Zoe shot back, defensive. "I can prove it. I'm a vampire. Or... or something like a vampire. I don't know. It just happened."

Raymond's years as a detective had given him a rather skeptical disposition. Still, it seemed rude and potentially counterproductive to immediately dismiss what Zoe was saying. She was already clearly in an agitated state, there was nothing to be gained by antagonizing her further. "Alright. I'd like to see this proof." Raymond said, trying not to sound patronizing. He did not entirely succeed.

"Look." Zoe pointed to a cracked mirror hanging on one wall of the office, next to Raymond's coat rack. "Look, look, look." She repeated as she got to her feet, planting herself directly in front of the mirror. "Do you see?"

Raymond did see. Or rather, didn't see. Zoe's complete lack of a reflection was as evident to him as it was to her. The detective spent a moment staring, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. He rose from his desk and moved to another angle, trying to no avail to catch a glimpse of Zoe in the mirror. "That's a neat trick, miss." He said, still gazing into the mirror. "Is this some sort of performance? You're a stage magician or something?"

"It's not a trick." Zoe insisted. "Take a picture of me." Now curious enough to play along, Raymond did as instructed. Digital cameras were necessary tools for a modern detective, and he quickly retrieved one from his desk. He

snapped a few pictures of a frowning Zoe in rapid succession, then pulled them up in the camera's memory. Every picture showed no trace of his strange new client. "See? And look at this." Zoe grabbed hold of the detective's desk lamp, turning it around to point straight at her. "See? No shadow."

This was getting stranger and stranger. Raymond was trying to come up with any reasonable explanation for what he was seeing, with no success. He stared at the shadow-free floor for another few seconds before retaking his seat, turning his desk lamp back to its proper position. "Alright. I'll give it to you, that's a new one." Raymond admitted, his eyes wide with disbelief. "You don't show up in mirrors or photographs, and you don't have a shadow. But... I mean, a vampire? What makes you jump to that conclusion?"

Zoe slumped back onto the ugly couch. "Because my friend and I were attacked by them. They ambushed us and drank our blood. The police thought we were dead. I woke up in the morgue!" Reliving the events threatened to make Zoe tear up, but she maintained her composure and continued on. "Everything is different. I feel stronger. My hearing and vision are better. I... I crave human blood." Zoe briefly considered mentioning her feeding earlier, but decided against it. She didn't trust Raymond enough yet, and she sounded crazy enough without those details.

Raymond took this all in, still attempting to find a rational explanation. This all sounded crazy, yet his finely honed detective's intuition told him that this strange young woman was telling him the truth. "... What about the rest of it? Can you fly? Turn into a bat?" He asked, curious to see how far this bizarre story would go.

"What? No!" Zoe seemed shocked by the notion. "I mean... I'm pretty sure no?"

"... Well, have you tried?" Raymond asked."

Zoe frowned, irritated by the question. She got to her feet and flapped her arms a few times in a ridiculous, exaggerated manner. "Nope. Can't fly." She huffed as she sunk back into the couch.

"I think it was a reasonable question, given what you're claiming." Raymond grumbled. "Alright. So... let's say... let's say I believe you. You still haven't explained what a vampire needs a detective for. You worried Van Helsing is following you around and you need me to keep eyes on him?"

Zoe crossed her arms, scowling with increased irritation. She felt Raymond was not treating her case with all the seriousness it was due, but she'd gotten too far into this with him to back out now. "I need you to find another vampire. Someone who will talk to me, not just attack me. Or... or I don't know. I at least need to know what kinds of things can hurt me now. Does sunlight actually kill people like me? Or the whole wooden stake thing? Or garlic?"

"There's an Italian place that does good garlic bread just down the street." Raymond replied flippantly. "We could test that one out there."

"The whole point..." Zoe began, increasingly annoyed. "... is to answer these things without testing dangerous or unpleasant things out on me."

"Fair enough." Raymond said, typing a few more notes into his computer. He took a beat, then spoke again. "Alright, Miss Evans. I can't believe I'm saying this, but... I'll take your case."

"You will?" Zoe blinked, surprised.

"Sure, why not?" Raymond said with a shrug. "Seems more interesting than chasing down yet another cheating husband." Plus business had been slow, and Raymond was in no position to turn down paying work. Of course he wasn't about to

mention that to his new client. "But there is something we need to discuss first-"

"It's okay." Zoe raised her hand. "I promise, you're in no danger around me. I have the blood thirst under control, I think. I'm not going to drink from you, you're my only hope of figuring this out. I have to hold on to my humanity, to not let this curse turn me into a monster like the thing that attacked me in-"

"I meant the bill, Miss Evans." Raymond replied, not wanting to let Zoe spiral too far down into vampire angst. "I charge fifty euros an hour, plus expenses. For a case as open ended as this one, I think a thousand euro retainer is appropriate, at least to start. Can you afford that?"

Zoe briefly wondered what her parents would have thought about her spending her inheritance on a Parisian detective to track down vampires. Under the circumstances, she saw no better options. "Yes."

Raymond nodded. "Very good." Money and phone numbers were exchanged, with Raymond's taking the form of a cheaply printed business card. "I'll call you with daily updates. Though I suppose in your case I should make those nightly updates."

Zoe nodded curtly, less than amused by Raymond continuing to make light of her situation. "Please work as quickly as you can. I'm... I really don't know where else to turn right now."

"These things usually aren't as bad as they seem." Raymond's stock reassurances felt especially empty in this situation. Who was he to say whether being transformed into a vampire was usually as bad as it seemed? It was a better line for jealous spouses than undead abominations.

Zoe certainly did not look comforted. "I'm going to... well.

I'm not sure where I'm going. Please call me as soon as you have anything, Monsieur Raymond."

"Just Raymond, please." The detective corrected, standing to shake Zoe's hand. "Goodnight, Miss Evans."

"Goodnight, Raymond." Zoe replied, turning to make a hurried exit from the detective's office. Raymond returned to his desk, taking a moment to process the unusual encounter. He stared at the jumble of notes on his computer monitor, wondering where the hell he was going to begin.

chapter eight

Sam Pynes

€3000. SHE HAD some money saved up, even after the downpayment on her new flat, but €3000 was nearly everything she had, assuming she was doing the conversion from pounds correctly in her head.

Zoe reminded herself she was probably never going back to London, to anything. “Not yet” she told herself “wait till you get answers before you assume the worst.” To get answers she needed money to pay the detective she had just hired, and she only had 100 euros in her pocket, the rest was safely stowed in her account at home. Or in Kate’s account. With a pang she remembered that she wasn’t the only one having a rough day. To get money she needed to find a cash machine and hope it didn’t have a low daily limit.

She passed a restaurant, Les Noces de Jeanette, named after the comic opera that originally premiered just up the road.

She tried to remember if she had ever seen a cash machine that let you take out €3000. Would her funds be frozen already? She hadn’t been dead all that long. Was she “dead,”

strictly speaking? She thought she knew the answer to that question.

The few people she passed wore coats, but she didn't feel cold. It had previously taken quite the chill to make her shiver, but this was different. The breeze wasn't warm, but she felt like she was the same temperature as the wind.

She felt very exposed. Modern cities were full of cameras, not the least around cash machines. Were cameras like mirrors? She had better not risk that they weren't. She was supposed to be dead and in the morgue, afterall, and a daylight stroll to the police station was not an experiment she wanted to undertake in her present condition.

She passed a doorway in the narrow street with "Opera-Comique" etched into the lintel. Above it was a smiling mask. The Salle Favart Comic Opera. Maybe she could find a mask or something in here. It couldn't hurt to try the door. It was open. She cautiously stepped inside.

Zoe found herself in a backstage hallway. Next to the door was a well-worn guard's chair. She could see the lights of the stage reflected in the dim hallway beyond and the muffled sound of an orchestra. Another darkened hallway ran along the edge of the theatre, connecting the stage to the box office. A nearby supply room was propped open with a broom. Among the mops and cleaners she found a bundle of cheap half-masks and beads, presumably for the staff to wear at costume events.

They were pretty ugly, and Zoe immediately began to redesign them in her head. She surreptitiously tried one on with black and red feathers. She started as she heard footsteps coming from the direction of the stage. She crept softly down the dark passage as she watched the guard resume his seat by the door. How was she to get out now? She adjusted the

uncomfortable mask as she continued to tiptoe away from him and toward the back of the theatre.

The passageway terminated at an unmarked door. She turned the knob slowly and peaked out into the brightly-lit entrance of the theatre. At the foot of two winding stairs was the statue of a woman seated on a pedestal, staring at her outstretched hand. Zoe looked at her own hand. It was nearly as white as the marble statue. It was true that she didn't go out much, but had she always been so pale? She touched the statue's hand. It was cold. Cold as death.

She knew she should leave, but something drew her up the winding stairs. As she climbed, she could hear laughing coming from behind the closed doors of the opera boxes. She thought it was strange that no one was stopping or questioning her. To her right was an open doorway that led to another brightly lit room. This was the Grand Foyer. Ornate frescos decorated the ceiling and walls, while bored looking attendants washed dishes behind the bar, waiting for the patrons to reemerge for intermission. One of the frescos showed a breakup scene: a women kneeling by a stream and crying into her hands, while a barefoot man chewed a reed unsympathetically. Zoe was getting distracted. She didn't know how much time she might have before...

Applause erupted from within as people almost immediately began to pour out of the theater and into the foyer and staircases.

The effect was immediate and overwhelming. She could smell them, the people. Her mouth felt dry, like she had never eaten or drunk anything in her entire life, and had just walked into the back of an Italian kitchen. The people wore expensive clothes which didn't look substantially different than the cheap and trashy dresses from her old ad campaigns. Normally Zoe

would have noticed this, but now the flowing mass of clothes was no more than the takeout bag in which the cheesy lasagna of the world resided. Most of the crowd ignored her, but something felt different in one part of the room, like an especially cold current in one part of a sunny river. Her eyes drifted that way and locked with the grey-blue eyes of an old man with a large black coat and a bushy grey moustache. His overcoat was as conspicuous in this warm room as her lack of coat had been in the chilly spring night.

Something in his eyes told her that he knew. He knew what she was. She had to get out here, she had to leave. She pushed through the crowd, the smell nearly overpowering her as she tried to find the doorway again. She looked back; he steadily followed, his gaze never wavering. She ran down the stairs and slid down the last few, sprawling on the floor. She got up stiffly and limped out the front door and into the night. The man followed purposefully down the stairs.

She ran back into the alley where she had entered and right into the man as he emerged from another small side door and into the street.

Metal flashed from under his coat. Zoe gave a cry and leaped back with a dexterity she did not know she possessed, as a knife sailed through the air she had just occupied. She grabbed his hand on the second swing and twisted the knife in his direction. He reacted much more than she thought he would have and lost his balance, stumbling into her. They both tumbled to the ground and he fell heavily on top of her. She pushed him off and stared in horror as he gasped and clutched at the silver handle protruding from his chest. She reached for the handle to pull it out, but the touch of it burned as if it were red hot, and her fingers blistered immediately where it scorched her. She tried again, but just to

touch it was excruciating. As the man gasped, she looked helplessly into his face repeating, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” His expression changed from anger to confusion, then slid into fear as he slipped away.

It had all happened so fast. She hadn’t meant to hurt him, even if he was trying to hurt her. There was blood on her hand. She didn’t know what made her do it, but she distractedly licked it off like it was chocolate. It tasted like water in a desert. A crazy hunger, a thirst, took hold of her and she leaned toward the fallen man like he was a magnet drawing her in toward the pale neck beneath his open and lifeless eyes. The pale moon glistened off the silver saliva that dripped from her teeth. She bit deeply into his neck.

As she walked away wearing the dead man’s overcoat, she could still smell the blood and realized that the tips her hair had soaked up some of the blood oozing from his chest and had singed where it came into contact with the knife. The smell of burnt hair and blood clung to her like a virus, announcing to the nostrils of the world what she had done, and what she had become.

Still wearing the mask, she again passed the quiet restaurant. She hadn’t noticed before, but a small cash machine was built into the small nook by the door. A sticker on the door said that the café took cash only. A security camera watched above, judging her silently. She would have to risk it. Where else would she get cash this late at night? She pushed up the collar of the over-large coat and approached the cash machine as nonchalantly as she could. She inserted her card and waited. It was accepted! The machine coldly informed her of its €2500 limit. Zoe growled in frustration, but withdrew the cash. She was still €400 short. She tried Kate’s card, but didn’t know her PIN.

Up the street she heard shouting, the body had been found! She pulled Kate's card and ran back up the street toward Raymond's office. The door was open and she walked into the waiting room. She didn't know whether she should risk going back in without the cash, but maybe €2600 would be enough? In desperation she stuck her hands into the coat pockets. A wallet! She hadn't even thought to look! Inside was €500. "I'm bleeding you dry, old guy," she thought to herself.

Wow. It hadn't taken long to become callous to exsanguinating someone. She shivered, but she couldn't tell if it was with horror or pleasure. Was she becoming a monster?

She ditched the coat behind the dusty secretary's desk and stuffed the mask into the trash. She was who she was and would be what she would be.

Raymond emerged from his office and sauntered down the hallway to her.

"You have the money?"

"You have a name?"

He narrowed his eyes on her mouth and she wiped it with the back of her hand. A little dried blood came free from her lower lip.

"Sorry, I..."

"It's alright. I've already eaten."

He gave her a warning glance as he took the wad of bills from her and walked backward to his office, opening the office door for her and ushering her in first. She would be who she would be.

chapter nine

Mirela Vasconcelos

THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT made everything seem soft and surreal as Raymond rounded the corner from the small Rue Favart onto the already bustling Boulevard des Italiens. The fresh scent of baking bread intermingled with the lightly caramelized and nutty coffee brewing at Merci Jérôme, a bakery he often frequented, especially after having spent the night in his first-floor office just a short walk down the street. It was no Tim Horton's, but the owner was friendly enough and the service was quick. He rotated his shoulder with a grimace before entering, cursing himself for not furnishing his office with a more comfortable sofa than the small grey one that had been there when he'd moved in.

“Good morning, Monsieur Raymond!” The bakery's owner, Clément, stood behind the counter with a warm smile. “Must be a difficult case for you to be here this early,” he continued in French, already preparing Raymond's usual order of coffee, croissant, and éclair.

After returning the greeting, Raymond pulled out his wallet, leaving a few euros on the counter. “No éclair this

morning, Clément. I need to focus, and I fear the sugar will make me jittery.”

“Ah, so a more difficult case than I imagined!” Clément handed him a cup of coffee and a warm croissant wrapped in wax paper. “Good luck, Monsieur,” he called as Raymond nodded, raising the cup of coffee in farewell before departing from the small shop.

This mundane interaction succeeded in grounding him a bit, juxtaposed as it was to his long night of researching what he’d previously taken to be fiction, folklore passed down for centuries representing the baser aspects of human nature, perhaps. If he hadn’t come face-to-face with the fearsome reality upon meeting Ms. Evans, he would’ve laughed at the thought of wasting an evening researching vampires, of all things. But now, this young woman’s life, if it could still be called that in any case, depended on his uncovering information on *real* vampires. He shook his head, still having difficulty accepting the truth that monsters really do exist, and refrained from wondering how many of the other stories also held up. Best to stick to one thing at a time.

Raymond walked at a brisk pace after polishing off his croissant and coffee. Normally, the cool morning air provided the perfect atmosphere to mull over a complex case, work out theories, and identify leads as the vibrant city came to life around him. The forward movement would help him feel as though he were headed toward something of an answer, a break in the case. Today was different. The hours spent pouring over website after website, post after post, and video after video hadn’t proven exactly fruitful. It was hard enough to distinguish fact from fiction on the internet on any given day, damn near impossible when it came to such a pervasive topic that was generally taken to be mythology. There was

nothing Raymond could grasp onto with any seriousness until he began noticing reference after reference to Marie Louise le Fanu's popular gothic vampire series, '*Fangs of Relish*.' The books had been around for a little over a decade and gained an impressive following. A surprising number of people from various niches on the web mentioned her work in their discussions.

With little else to go on, an excerpt from one of le Fanu's novels became the proverbial final nail in the coffin, leading Raymond to look further into the author. Her vivid descriptions and eloquent exposition of coming into contact with a creature of the night, as she had put it, transported him back to the fateful evening when Ms. Evans first requested a meeting. Le Fanu captured perfectly the dreadful recognition of something otherworldly in the creature that had stood before him, a mere human shell that radiated with ungodly power that both repulsed and attracted him. The cognitive dissonance of wanting to offer his help to the human woman she had once been and also to rid the world of such a frightening existence had heretofore been unmatched. He was a strong man, but had felt as powerless as a leaf in a storm in Ms. Evans' presence. The fear of standing before *something* fighting against their every urge to drain his body of life was still palpable, and it had been strangely comforting to read the words describing the interaction almost exactly as he had experienced it, as if he weren't alone in this horror.

He shivered and shook his head again in an effort to clear the memory of the way Ms. Evans had stood before him, statuesque, eyes and fangs glinting in the soft light. It was unclear whether his skin would ever stop crawling. Le Fanu *must* have had some knowledge of real vampires given the way she wrote about them, or at least he hoped, and upon

discovering she lived a short distance north of Paris in the old royal town of Senlis, Raymond decided to pay her a visit.

Incapable of stopping by a stranger's home unannounced, Raymond required help in contacting and arranging a meeting with le Fanu. No doubt she was bombarded by fans regularly, and would be much more receptive to his request if it came from a more reputable source. Luckily, he knew the perfect person to ask.

Working his way south on Rue de Richeilieu, he passed the Louvre and crossed the Seine before making his way east to the small Square René Viviani where the independent Shakespeare and Company bookstore was located. Raymond was betting that if the request to meet le Fanu came from here, she would certainly accept. After all, when you get a call from one of the most famous independent bookstores in the world, you answer.

Known for housing aspiring writers and artists in exchange for their assistance around the shop, Raymond had helped a young man secure one of the many beds tucked neatly between the bookshelves shortly after arriving in the city three years ago. Since then, Raymond would check in on the boy from time to time. Aside from feeling an affection for young Yanis, he knew how beneficial such connections could be in his line of work.

Every inch of the shop seemed to be occupied by literature of some sort or other. It was easy to get lost among the rooms of wall to ceiling shelves of books that continued without end, but Raymond had been there enough times to familiarize himself with the shop's layout.

"Yanis," he called, passing under the doorway with the bookstore's iconic motto, 'Be Not Inhospitable to Strangers Lest they Be Angels in Disguise' painted above its frame.

The young man turned suddenly at the sound of his name and smiled broadly. "Always a pleasure to see you, Raymond," he replied jovially in English.

"And you," Raymond responded, clapping a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Everything been well here since I last saw you?"

"Oh yes, very, but you seem as though you have a more pressing question."

"I do. I'm hoping you might be able to help me arrange a meeting with an author, Marie Louis le Fanu, who lives up in Senlis, I believe. I'm working a case, and it would be helpful to discuss certain aspects of her books with her in person."

"Ah yes, I've heard of her series. Vampires, yes?" Yanis placed the last few books in his arms in their appropriate shelf and motioned toward a comfortable armchair in the corner. Raymond obliged and sat patiently. "Babette should be able to reach her. She called just last month, asking for her series to be moved to the front of the shop, since it seems a new book will be released soon. I'll be right back."

Raymond sank back into the chair as Yanis vanished behind a row of books, incredibly grateful for his stroke of luck. What were the odds that there would be such convenient leverage to convince le Fanu to meet with him? Things finally seemed to be going his way, and as he leaned farther back into the cushions as soft as clouds, Raymond's muscles relaxed and his eyelids drooped. The soft jazz coming from the speakers along with the gentle voices around him and the sweet musky smell of books lulled him into a sense of safety he hadn't thought would be possible to feel again. In the soft light streaking through the window, Raymond drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened gently a short while later by Yanis.

"I'm sorry to wake you when you look so peaceful, but you

must get up. Madame le Fanu has agreed to the meeting, and you must leave now to arrive there in time. She does live in Senlis, as you thought. A taxi is waiting to take you to the du Nord station. Take the train to Chantilly-Gouvieux, and then bus number 15 to Senlis. Here,” he said, placing a small piece of paper in Raymond’s hand. “The address and directions.”

Raymond’s hands closed over Yanis’ and squeezed in gratitude, “Thank you, Yan.”

In all, it was over an hour’s travel through the countryside to Senlis, a picturesque medieval town with vivid history, narrow cobblestoned alleyways, and beautiful Romanesque architecture. Raymond took in the afternoon sun shining brilliantly on the striking surroundings as he and le Fanu sat around a small wrought iron table in her backyard.

“— and so,” she continued in French, “You must understand, I was very surprised by this request. Never have I hosted a Private Detective in my home. Whatever could your case have to do with my work, Monsieur Raymond?”

Raymond cleared his throat, “I’m unable to discuss my case in any real depth, as I must protect the privacy of my client, as I’ve said, but I wanted to speak to you because of your vast knowledge on the topic of vampires.”

The middle-aged woman laughed sweetly, “Is your client interested in vampires, Monsieur?”

Raymond deliberately ignored her question. “Where did you find the inspiration for your work, if I may ask?”

Her eyes flared in anger suddenly, “I assure you I did not steal the idea from anyone, if this is what your client is accusing me of!”

“No, no,” Raymond said with a reassuring smile, raising his hands in defense. “Not at all, Madame. I’ve come to you not

to accuse you of anything, but rather..." he paused, at a loss for words. None of his previous cases could have prepared him for this. "To seek your help. You see, you've painted a very realistic representation of vampires, breathed such life into them as to make them more realistic than I believe anyone else in the genre, which is part of the reason I think your series has been so popular over the years." Raymond was pleased to see his words had a positive effect on the author. "Now, what I'm about to tell you must stay between us," he paused again and waited for her eager nod before continuing.

"My... client," he began slowly, "Had an experience with something they believe could have been..." he made a show of looking around to ensure no one could overhear them, despite the fact they were alone, then leaned in closer and whispered, "Something *otherworldly*." His voice returned to normal and he pulled back a bit, satisfied that le Fanu closed the space between them once more by leaning toward him. "Have you ever had an experience like this?" Raymond was cautious with his tone, wanting to convey deference and credulity.

"Monsieur," le Fanu whispered back to him. "An experience such as this in my youth is what inspired my series."

"Will you share that experience with me, Madame?"

Le Fanu was all too happy to take center stage, and obliged. "It must have been about 20 years ago now, some girlfriends and I came to visit Senlis. We lived in another small town to the north at the time, Fleurines. One evening after dinner, myself and another girlfriend decided to take a stroll near the Cinema Jeanne D Arc before the evening show. Lost in conversation and enjoying the cool night air, we didn't notice our steps, or that we were being followed. By the time

we finally began feeling that prickling on the back of our necks as if we were being watched, we realized we'd strayed from the main roads and that it had gotten very dark. We didn't see him directly with the way he moved in the shadows, so quick, impossible speeds, really. At one point, I'm not sure whose idea it was, but we had a camera with us, and decided to use the flash as a light of sorts. I don't think he was expecting such a bright flash, because when we snapped the picture, he froze and in that quick second of light, I saw..." she paused and Raymond nodded encouragingly for her to continue. "He had an impossibly young face for such a large stature, I noticed that first. Then, the blood dripping from his chin, and the strange redness in his eyes. We screamed and thank God, someone in the house behind us opened their door to see what the commotion was. As the light from indoors flooded the small street, he vanished. I never saw him again, but that experience stayed with me for the rest of my life. I began writing the first of the '*Fang's of Relish*' books not too long after that, and once that was published, I moved to Senlis in the hopes of catching another glimpse. Now, it could have been some young man playing some kind of joke, and this is what our fathers decided to believe once we told them, but my girlfriend and I both knew that wasn't the case. What we felt, what we saw... it was unexplainable."

"The picture you took, did you ever get it developed?"

"Why of course, the very next day. I was frightened, but curious and wanted to see more, but once it developed, it was just a picture of the empty street, no mystery in sight. I was certain he was in the frame when the camera snapped, but I must've been mistaken."

"Thank you for sharing your story with me, Madame. If I may ask one more question?" Le Fanu inclined her head, and

Raymond continued, “In the time you’ve lived here, have you come in contact with anything like that again?”

“If only, Monsieur Raymond, if only. I’ve had to rely on my own imagination and memory of that night to fill my stories since then. But I am very grateful to have shared such an experience. It has brought me much in life.”

“I see, thank you again, Madame le Fanu, for your time, for sharing your memories, and for your wonderful works of fiction. I believe I’ve taken enough of your time today, it was truly a pleasure to meet you.”

“It was my pleasure to assist with your case, Monsieur, I’m sure.”

Raymond exchanged a few more farewells with the older women before being escorted to the front door, where a taxi was waiting to drive him to the bus station. Once at a safe distance, he cursed quietly to himself, disappointed with the meeting. While the author may well have encountered a vampire in her youth, it was a fleeting exposure and she provided no valuable information for him to pass on to Ms. Evans, other than the small tidbit that the young woman may never appear in a photograph again, which Raymond knew would neither help her survive nor seek revenge on behalf of her deceased friend.

Dejected, Raymond watched the countryside pass him by, at a loss for his next move.

chapter ten

Nick Calvert

“IT SOUNDS LIKE THEY’RE hiding something, Craig.”

“Does it?” Craig scratched the back of his head, a nervous tell he’d been trying to stop ever since university. “Why would they?”

“Because, you dear daft man, they’ve lost your sister’s body.” Jane’s smile wavered, then fell away. “I’m so sorry, darling. That was inconsiderate of me.”

Craig gave her a wan smile. “I wish you were here.”

“Me too,” Jane said, “Me too.

“So, have you decided what you’re going to do? How long you’re going to stay?”

“Kind of,” Craig said. “I thought I’d go and see where they were staying, check out their hotel. Then I want to get some answers from the police.”

“Good idea.”

“Yeah, but....”

“But what?” Jane said.

Craig sighed. “How could they afford it, Jane? Paris. That hotel. Neither Zoe or Kate had any money, and the place they

were staying cost a bomb. I'm... I'm confused."

"You think they were what... on the game?"

"Sweetheart, ever since your parents' accident you've taken on your dad's role when it comes to Zoe. It was fine when she was a teenager, but she's an adult now."

"Was," Craig said.

"Yes. Sorry."

"I know there are hundreds, probably thousands of explanations as to why they were in Paris. I just wish she'd told me what she was up to. And why is her body missing, Jane? Perhaps she's still alive...."

"What's the weather like?"

"Huh?" Craig frowned at the abrupt change of topic.

"Isn't that what the English are supposed to ask one another?" Jane said, smiling.

"Probably," Craig smiled back. "It's gorgeous, truth be told. Paris in the spring. The sun's shining, and what the hell am I doing inside?"

"That's better, hun. Call me later?"

"Absolutely. Give Frank Lloyd a pat from me, would you?"

"Will do. She's in the garden chasing that bloody squirrel, again."

"Kiss kiss."

"Kiss kiss, sweetheart." Craig said, ending the Skype call. He answered a couple of emails from his PA, then closed the laptop, put it in the room safe, strapped on his money belt complete with his passport, grabbed his jacket and left, closing the door carefully behind him.

An hour later Craig was quietly crying on a bench by the Seine. He'd always wanted to spend time in Paris, but never had. Now Paris would always equate to death. The pale spring sun

reflected off the ripples in the river left by tourist boats. It was warm but he felt chilled and inconsolably sad. He wanted to solve his Zoe's murder, but hadn't the faintest idea how to begin. Worse, there were so many things he should have said to her, and now he'd never have the chance.

What was it the French said... *c'est la vie*: that's life. A bit obvious, but true nonetheless. Craig dug in his pocket, pulled out his hankie and wiped his eyes. He blew his nose, nodded firmly to himself, then stood up. Someone would pay for Zoe's death. He'd make damn sure of it.

With the Eiffel tower at his back Craig walked over the Pont de Bir-Hakim to the north side and the 16th Arrondissement. Another twenty minutes saw him standing on Place de Mexico outside Le Metropolitan, an expensive boutique hotel, and the last place Zoe and Kate had been seen alive.

Mentally girding his loins, Craig walked inside.

"Bonjour Monsieur," the concierge said with a smile.

"Oh, umm, err... je suis désolé, je ne parle pas français. Parlez vous anglais?" Craig could hear his French accent was awful and blushed.

"Of course I do, sir," the concierge's smile widened. "And thank you. I do appreciate you trying to speak my language. So many don't. Now, how may I assist you?"

Craig glanced around. The lobby was empty, though there was muted conversation coming from the restaurant.

"May I have a word with you, please. In private?"

The concierge looked him over, then nodded. "Pierre, s'occuper de la réception, s'il vous plaît." She walked around the desk.

"My name is Marie Jose," she said and extended her hand. Craig shook it.

“Craig Evans, and my thanks.”

“My office is this way.” She said, leading him down a corridor and into an uncarpeted room. There was a Large desk with two computer monitors, a couple of visitors chairs, and piles of nondescript cardboard boxes lining the walls. They sat.

“How may I be of help?” Marie said.

“I am the brother of one of the two women murdered recently.” Craig said.

“je suis vraiment désolé... I am so sorry. What can I do to help?”

Craig cleared his throat. “Do you remember my sister and her friend?”

“Of course. Le Metropolitan is a small hotel which makes it much easier to remember guests. They were here on a last minute weekend break, which is, as you probably know, much the cheapest way to stay in Paris.”

“No, I didn’t know that,” Craig admitted. “I assumed that a hotel like this would be very expensive.”

“Oh, it is,” Marie smiled. “But if we have rooms available, or a last minute cancellation, then we reduce the price and put them up on Booking dot com, or Trivago. Thanks to the internet we seldom have empty rooms.”

“So, they had a cheap deal?”

“Oui, I believe so,” Marie said.

Craig tapped a foot contemplatively. “Were you here... that night?”

“I was. I was asleep. The night porter woke me when the police arrived.” Marie pursed her lips.

“And?” Craig asked after a moment’s silence.

“They had a keycard and wanted to check it was from this hotel. It was, though it was not in good condition. The police

checked the room, sealed it off, and médecine légale, I am sorry, you say... who are the American CSI people?"

"Forensics?"

"Yes! The forensics took control. Forensics, another word I learn but hope not to use again." She shuddered dramatically.

"A lot of guests complained. You know how it is."

"I can imagine," Craig said quietly.

"One strange thing happened," Marie said, "but Hubert, he is our IT manager, put it down to a computer malfunction, so I did not inform the police."

Craig stopped tapping his foot and sat up. "What?!"

"The police and the, 'ow you say, forensics people left just before midnight."

"Yes?"

"They'd packed up and taken the girls' belongings, but the room was still in their custody."

"Yes?"

"I didn't find out until the next day, but, when I checked the keycard logs, their room had been accessed at 4.00am. That was a long, long time after the police had left."

"Huh." Craig said. "Damn. But what does it mean?"

"Hubert still thinks it was a spike in the system. There was nothing on the video we have," Marie said, as she took Craig back to the lobby. "I am sorry for your loss," she added, as they shook hands.

"Me too," Craig said. "Thank you for your help, Marie. Which police station should I go to?"

"Their headquarters is in the 13th arrondissement. Rue Albert, I think. Shall I check?"

"Don't worry. I'll find a taxi," Craig said. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. Goodbye."

Craig Walked down to the Jardin de Trocadero and sat by the fountains for a while looking across the Seine at the Eiffel Tower. Paris was beautiful, and he wished he and Zoe had got to see it together. He hadn't a doubt that she would eventually have become a successful designer, maybe even picked up by one of the famous couturiers in Paris! He grinned at what she'd have said. They'd have been a 'blimey' and a 'fucking hell' in there somewhere.

He pulled his phone out and dialled Jane. The call went to voicemail.

"Hi, love. Just me. I've been to the hotel and talked to Marie, the concierge. Not a lot of info, except one weird thing. I'll tell you later. Hope you're well. Hugs to you and the brute. Bye!"

He slid the phone back in his trouser pocket and stood up.

A little girl of about five or six ran into him and clutched at his legs, crying and babbling something in French. He was about to bend over to console her when he felt a hand brush the side of his trouser leg. Jumping upward, he bellowed loudly and, empty handed, the girl and a boy of a similar age leapt away from him.

"Putain salop!" The boy said, then gave him the finger, grabbed the girl's hand and they both ran off, laughing. Craig watched them go. Perhaps some families just had rotten luck, he mused. Losing the parents to a car crash was hard, but a sister to murder. It wasn't bloody well fair. And now an attempted pickpocketing. He took a deep breath, let it out in a sigh, and went to look for a taxi.

Craig supposed it was possible to find a more dangerous and garrulous taxi driver in Paris, but he wouldn't have bet on it. He was literally shaking as he got out of the taxi in front of

the 'Prefecture De Police' on the Rue Albert in the 13th arrondissement. A bored looking policeman cradling a submachine gun watched him with disinterest as he paid, then made his way to the entrance.

Craig was pissed off. The attempted pickpocketing and taxi ride aside, he'd been in a reasonable mood when he'd arrived at the Police Station, but it had been an hour before he'd got to talk to anyone, and over three before he finally, and, he gathered, begrudgingly, had been passed onto one of the officers assigned to his sister's case. Now they were facing each other across a table in an interview room and the officer didn't seem to want to speak english.

"For the nth time, sir, I don't speak French." Craig said, clenching his fist underneath the table. "Je suis désolé!"

"Ah, so you can speak French!" The young officer said.

"And you speak English." Craig snapped back. "My sister has been murdered and you're getting sniffy about language. What sort of policeman are you? What sort of human being?"

The officer, who looked to be in his early twenties, bit his lower lip. Then he pushed his chair back, stood up, and offered Craig his hand. "I apologise. I'd put it down to Brexit or Trump, but those are a feeble excuse. My name is Paul Gabriel."

Craig got to his feet and they shook, then sat down again.

"I'm sorry, too. It's been a bad few days. However, I have some news for you."

"News?"

"Mmm. I wanted to see the hotel Zoe stayed at. So I went, and got talking to the concierge, a nice woman by the name of Marie Jose."

"Marie Jose," Paul murmured as he wrote. "Yes, I met her.

Very, erm... on the ball?”

Craig chuckled. “Good use of vernacular, Paul. Spot on!

“Yes, she’s on the ball alright. The day after you and your forensic team left Marie found that the room had been accessed by keycard at 4.00am.

“That’s impossible!”

“It’s logged. Her IT man says he thinks it might be a spike in the system, but it still appears in the log. Though there’s nothing on their video. Do you have a copy?”

“Of course. I’ll go and check, and get us a coffee, too.” Paul left, closing the door behind him.

Craig looked around, pitying those being interviewed. The walls were bleak: a dark green institutional colour, with a paler green above the dado line; the facing wall was mirrored, and a camera with a blinking red light was inset into the ceiling. He barked a laugh as he realised that he was being interviewed, albeit in a friendly manner. He frowned. It hadn’t started that way, had it? Could Paul be good—cop bad— cop all on his own? Maybe that was giving him too much credit, but then Paul hadn’t mentioned his rank, had he?

Craig stood up and went to try and peer through the mirror. He couldn’t see anything. Grinning, he sat back down on Paul’s side of the table, with the mirror at his back.

Ten minutes later Paul returned with a large paper bag in one hand, which he placed on the floor, and a tray with two steaming cups in the other. The coffee smelt wonderful. Without a word, other than a bit of a raised eyebrow, Paul sat down facing the mirror and pushed a cup towards Craig.

“Thank you, Inspector.” Craig said.

The eyebrow went higher.

“Fair enough, Mr Evans,” Paul chuckled, “You caught me. Please understand this case is more complicated than it looks,

and I had to check you out. Okay?”

“Yes, that’s fair. And the keycard?”

“The video shows nothing. Oh, do try the coffee. Really, it’s very good.”

“Nothing?”

“No, so logically we have to assume it’s a hotel employee. An employee who had enough access to edit the video, but not enough to change the keycard logs. They’re on different systems, you see.”

“Damn.” Craig said, taking a sip from the cup.

“But I do thank you for bringing it to my attention. Merci.”

“What can you tell me about my sister’s murder?” As Craig said it he felt himself about to cry. He took a deep breath, looked down at the table with its pencilled graffiti, and clenched his teeth. When finally he looked back at Paul he saw nothing but compassion in the man’s expression.

“I should not really tell you anything, Craig. This must go no further. I have your word?”

“You do.”

“Because your sister’s body is missing we cannot say, and certainly cannot prove, she was murdered. We’re assuming she was, only because of the pathologist’s report on Kate. The photographic evidence is, I am sad to say, inconclusive.”

“I don’t know what to say, or what to think. How can a body vanish from a morgue?”

“We very much want to know this, too. At the moment the finger of suspicion is pointing everywhere.

“Will you be staying in Paris, or returning home?”

“I don’t know,” Craig said.

The inspector picked up the Paper bag, placed it on the table and withdrew a sheet of typed paper and a pen. “I have here your sister’s belongings. There are a few items that we

think she would have had that we haven't found. Maybe these missing bits are the key to her... troubles."

"Such as?"

"A purse or wallet. Her handbag is here, but it is almost empty. Also, her passport. They have a high value on the black market. Her phone is still being examined, but I will get it back to you as soon as I can."

"Thank you," Craig said, signing the receipt. Fifteen minutes later he found himself back on the Rue Albert. A different bored looking policeman, cradling a submachine gun and chewing gum, gave him a desultory once-over, then blew a large pink bubble, turned and walked away.

Craig didn't even bother asking. Gritting his teeth he walked the other way, looking for a Taxi.

chapter eleven

Alisia Faust

BODIES DON'T JUST DISAPPEAR, Craig thought to himself. He scrolled through the webpage, his eyes nearly pressed together in a hard squint. The blueish light from his laptop illuminated his face in a sallow glow, the only light in his dim hotel room. *Leave it to the bloody French to somehow lose a dead body. Maybe if they pulled their heads out of their baguettes something would get done.*

The police dragged their feet, more concerned with where their croissants were than his sister's missing body. Craig knew that if he didn't get any answers fast, then there would be another missing body the frogs could pretend didn't exist. The only way to do that was to investigate his sister's disappearance himself.

He was sure he looked a right mess. He could practically feel the bags dragging down his eyes. If he hadn't lost what remained of his hair yet, it would only be a matter of time. Crinkled packages of discarded crisps littered the room, the crumbs nearly ground into the carpet from when he paced back and forth.

The desk vibrated as his mobile blinked with another

missed call. It was Jane ... again. He'd call her back when he had some news, which is what he'd convinced himself the last six times she'd called too.

Craig gripped his hair in a frustrated groan, roughly pushing his laptop aside. French, French, and more French. He was so tired of seeing French! How did he expect to begin his own investigation when he couldn't read bloody anything? His chair scratched against the carpet as he stood up and resumed pacing.

No, this wasn't right. Zoe was all he had left and she deserved justice. He couldn't give up.

Taking a deep breath, Craig bit back his vexation. He had to think of Zoe, because no one else would. Plopping back into his chair, he reached for the computer again. His fingers flew across the keys as he tried once more, changing up his search words. Then he paused, his lips twitching into a smile.

Louis Raymond, Private Detective. The bold words glared starkly against the white screen. A hopeful flutter tickled his chest. English, that was English! Craig eagerly clicked the website, his heart rate quickening. It slowed back into a low pulse when he skimmed through more French, the flutter melting into disappointment. Beneath the French was an English translation and his heart thundered once more.

Fluent in French and English. That was all he needed to read.

Papers shuffled and skidded across the desk as he reached for a pen. He randomly snatched a loose page, knocking over an empty, stained coffee cup resting upon it. It bounced harmlessly onto the floor. Craig ignored it, scribbling the address onto the page, too distracted to notice the faint brown rings discolouring the page. Folding it up, Craig ran his fingers through his hair in a hurried attempt to comb it and grabbed his coat, barely shutting the door behind him.

The cab stopped somewhere on the Rue Favart -- somewhere that was not the address. Craig didn't understand the string of French tumbling out of the driver's mouth, but his wide gestures made it clear this was where he had to step out. No amount of pointing could change the driver's mind. Nor did it seem to make a difference when he spoke exaggeratingly slowly, increasing his volume like the remote on a TV.

"Fine," he grudgingly agreed, slamming the door behind him just before the taxi sped off.

At least he was on the right road.

Craig swivelled in place, like a swinging compass getting its bearings. He squinted at the faded numbers on the structures, grumbling when passersby bumped him in the street. A part of him still appreciated the mixture of classical, baroque, and modern styles of architecture. Paris's elaborate history was showcased everyday in even the most ordinary of buildings. But he couldn't afford to linger on that now. Eventually, he moved through the crowd, slinking and threading his way through the people until he reached a weathered building.

Pulling open the doors, he slipped inside, his footsteps echoing in the lobby. A small hallway opened into a reception area with a deep mahogany desk perched along the wall. The phone flashed with unread messages, and the computer screen bounced fireworks, beckoning someone to wake it.

Craig waited for the receptionist to return, impatiently checking his watch every few seconds. After ten minutes had passed, he decided to knock directly on the door marked *Louis Raymond*.

"Entrez," a voice called from within.

Craig strode into the office, which had a large desk situated in the middle of the room. Surrounding the desk were three

chairs. A small, grey couch was jammed into the corner. The cushions caved into itself, punched into submission by one too many a heavy buttocks.

Behind the desk sat a man whose skin was a rich, flawless umber. He wore a fitted button down shirt, undone at the collar, that stretched uncomfortably tightly to cover his broad shoulders. The man looked like he could hold his own in a fight. He fixed Craig with an unblinking stare, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

"My apologies for the intrusion," Craig said, "however, it seems your receptionist is not in today."

"Ah, yes," his accent was a welcome change, a flat and neutral Canadian tone, "that would be because I don't have one. Sorry for the confusion."

Craig paused, but the man remained stoic. He looked back at the receptionist's desk, neatly organised to give the illusion of employment. Why even bother with the facade ...?

"How may I help you?" He asked, clearing his throat.

"Oh, yes." Craig snapped back to attention and settled into one of the chairs. "My name is Craig Evans. Mr. Raymond --"

"Please, just Raymond will do."

"Of course," he paused, "Raymond, I need help finding someone. Your website listed you as a detective."

Raymond nodded. "That's right."

"You must be used to these sorts of cases then?"

"I've had more than a few."

Craig bit back the next question dangling on the tip of his tongue. *And how successful were you in finding your targets?*

The question wasn't productive and he didn't want to put Raymond in an awkward position. Besides, it wasn't as if he had a lot of options at the moment. Alienating the one English speaking detective he could find would put him back

at square zero.

"Here's the situation. I need to find my sister."

Wordlessly, Raymond spread opened a notebook and clicked open a pen.

"She's got light brown hair, probably about shoulder length, maybe longer, and green eyes. She's not that tall, somewhere around 5'4", I think, and she's slim." Craig was surprised at how difficult it was to describe Zoe. He could picture her, an exact image in his mind, yet that image struggled to translate out of his mouth.

Raymond jotted down notes, quickly at first, but Craig noticed how his pen slowed the more he described her. His description was too generic, wasn't it? He felt like it was.

"How long has she been missing?"

"Well, you see, that's where it becomes complicated ..."
Craig trailed off under Raymond's questioning gaze. "I don't know."

"You don't know."

"She went missing before I even arrived in Paris, and talking to the police has been like talking to a brick wall."

A breath of air puffed out of Raymond's nose. "Yeah, well, if they were competent then I'd be out of a job."

Despite himself, Craig cracked a smile before slipping back into earnestness. "All I know is that I received a call to identify a body, but when I got to the morgue, there was no body to be found. If it's not negligence on the police's part -- which, frankly, I'm not ruling out -- then someone must have taken her. But why? I can't imagine anyone but the killer would have a reason. Therefore, if we find Zoe, we find the killer."

Raymond's pen had nearly slowed to a stop, but at the mention of Zoe's name it pressed against the page for a split second, the hesitation so miniscule that Craig would have

missed it if he hadn't been watching the man like a hawk.

"Zoe Evans?" Raymond repeated.

"That's right."

His face was a careful mask, except for a small twitch in his lips. He snapped the notebook shut. "Sorry, I can't help you."

Craig started at Raymond's sudden change of heart. "Why not? You just said you've taken on more than a few missing persons cases."

"Mr. Evans --"

"Craig."

"Craig, a missing cadaver is not the same as a missing person."

"I understand, but surely it can't be that different? In either case you start out not knowing where your target is."

"I'm sorry. This is not a case that I can take." His tone suggested that was the end of the conversation, but Craig disagreed. "Give me a reason why you can't take this case. I won't leave you alone until you do."

"There is no case," Raymond said, "the body was in police custody when it went missing. This is a matter for the police to resolve with an internal investigation."

"The problem is that I can't get the police to do bloody well anything!" Craig ran his hand through his hair, forcing himself to calm down. He shook his head. "I don't believe it's so cut and dry. There's more to this, I can feel it deep in my gut. You know that feeling, don't you?"

"I do, and my gut tells me that I can't help you."

Craig fell silent. Nobody cared about Zoe. The hard truth shocked him like a splash of ice water, dousing the hope that drove him through these doors. It now sank into the pit of his stomach like a heavy stone, twisting and rolling and gathering into a knotted ball of fire.

Nobody except him.

He stood abruptly, the force of which precariously teetered his chair.

"Thank you for your time," he said, shards of ice dripping from his words.

A shadow of regret crossed Raymond's face, too fleeting to be certain it was there. He opened his mouth and closed it. Then said, "I hope you're able to find the answers you're looking for."

"I will, and it won't be because of you." Craig firmly shut the door, leaving the office and Louis Raymond behind him.

Raymond reached for the phone and dialed a number. The soft click of the tone gave way to an excitable female voice, "Raymond! Tell me you have good news."

"I have good news."

"Do you now? Well, good! Come on, spill it!"

"Your brother is here in Paris, Ms. Evans, and he's determined to find you."

A pause.

"What?"

Raymond remained impassive. "Craig Evans just left my office, disappointed that he could not secure my services to find you."

"No, I heard that. ... I just ... I thought you said you had good news."

"Yes."

A deep sigh could be heard through the phone. "You know, you don't always have to take things so literally."

"I don't always do so."

There was another beat of silence.

"So, what did you tell him?" Zoe's voice was strained by a

false bravado.

"That I couldn't help him."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

The tension was palpable. Raymond's voice was unusually soft when he spoke again. "It's better this way."

"I know. He wouldn't understand or believe it. Honestly, sometimes I don't even believe it myself." She cleared her throat. "I need a moment to think. Give me a ring when you've got more news. Make sure it's actually good news next time, please."

"Yeah, I will."

Raymond hung up the phone and stared at the empty receptionist's desk. Maybe it was time to fill that position.

chapter twelve

Greg Ray

ZOE LOOKED AROUND AT the high decor of the place. "You don't live here," she said.

The man pursed his lips. "No, but perhaps someone I once was once did."

Zoe found even this hard to believe, but didn't press the point.

When Raymond's call had come in, she had dropped everything.

—*You really found someone?*

—*Blood and all. If you're sure you want to talk to this guy.*

—*But how did you do it?*

—*This is Paris. Don't ask.*

She hadn't really expected to hear from him. But here she was at midnight out on the Rue de l'Ombre in some part of Paris she had never heard of. The entrance to the address for the meet was through a gated courtyard off the street. It's old wooden doors were wide open when they arrived in spite of the hour. The lock of the gate obviously broken. The front

door was, likewise left ajar.

"What's your name?" Zoe asked.

Amid all the old stuffed furnishings of the place, the man they had come to meet sat in a straight-back chair — set right in the middle of the room. He was facing away from them when they walked in. "Come," he said, the moment they entered. He did not get up.

Sitting there, the figure looked like nothing so much as a crow folded down into your favorite dining chair. This was a man you would immediately distrust. Dark, angular features, haggard about the face, his hair hanging in strings. He was not old, he might even have been young, but impossible to guess how young. Age did not fit him just as this room did not fit him.

"I don't think we need to be so formal," he replied. "It's better that we don't have names, isn't it, *Zoe*?"

"Yes, I guess it would be." She looked askance at Raymond. Raymond shrugged his shoulders. Another thing she would have to let go, she decided. So much for the anonymity of her hoodie. "I have questions."

"And I — have needs," the man replied.

Raymond came forward on cue and held out an envelope of cash.

The man did not reach for it. He raised one hand, long wiry fingers, palm up. Raymond took another step closer, placed the envelope on his hand.

The man's fingers caught Raymond's hand and held it a moment. "Thank you." With his other hand, scraped one fingernail down the back of Raymond's hand.

Raymond jerked away and instinctively put his hand to his mouth. Then quickly yanked it back out.

The man smiled unpleasantly.

The man's attention returned to Zoe. "I've changed my mind. Call me *Crow*." He looked her dead in the eye. "In the name of honesty."

Was he reading her mind now? Was that a vampire thing? Zoe couldn't think if she had heard of that. It wasn't as if *she* was hearing anybody's thoughts.

"So, you and your friend are interested in vampirism."

"Vampires," she corrected.

"Of course." And he began to tell them about the practices of vampirism, ancient and modern — the sharing of blood. In the course of which he intimated several times that, if they were ready — truly ready, he emphasized — he could gain them secret access to the sanguine culture of Paris. As the man Crow spoke, his fingers played over the pearlescent handle of what Zoe at first took for a fancy knife. It certainly belonged to the household here, and which she decided was merely a letter opener. He turned it in his hands, over and over, as though studying it as he spoke.

Zoe interrupted. "No, I mean *real* vampires. I need to know how this stuff really works. I can look things up, but I don't know what's real." She paced. "Okay I know some stuff, sure, but I need answers. So like, mirrors. Okay, no reflections. I get that. Though I never really thought about how annoying that would be on a day to day basis. Also, no selfies. Whatever." She stopped. "Hey, what about shadows? I didn't think about that." She glanced at the nearest candle. Not important, she decided. "Sunlight. What about sunlight? Never mind, I already singed my hair. Holy water. No, that's dumb." Her eyes lit up. "I need to travel. Can I cross the Seine? The Channel?"

"What?"

"Can I cross the Seine?"

The man Crow turned up his hands.

"The Seine? Crossing running water?"

"I never heard that one."

"So I can do it?"

"I suppose."

"What do you mean *you suppose*?"

"I mean, yes! Why not?"

"What about flying. Can I fly?"

The man looked down, turned the opener in his fingers, and just sighed.

"And am I going to turn into an animal? Like some kind of bat or a wolf? Because I think that disgusting."

"Look, mademoiselle—"

A glint of light caught her eye and Zoe stopped in her tracks. The letter opener turned around and around in Crow's hands. Its shiny blade flashed out to her in the candlelight as he idly flipped it up in the air. Zoe wanted it.

The light struck her eye again and she flinched. In the next moment, she was as close breath to it, watching it flip end over end in front of her. All she had to do was reaching out and pluck it from the air.

She blinked and the opener was gone. She looked down and the man in his chair was right there, staring up at her. The letter opener was in her hand. Something had shifted. She felt it. She looked down at him. Why was this man wasting her time?

"You know, I don't have time for this— fakery, Mssr. Crow. Look, this is silver, isn't it?" She grabbed the man's hand and drew the flat of the opener blade across it. "See?"

The man let out a howl. Zoe jumped back, shocked to see she had burned the flesh of his hand. She hadn't expected

that, hadn't expected that at all. She threw the opener away from her.

"You *are* a vampire." Zoe pulled back her hoodie. "Too."

The man rose from his chair, mouth agape. His jaw opened wider and wider — and from his throat came a terrifying screech.

Zoe winced away from the terrible sound. But at that moment Raymond stepped forward holding a crucifix before him.

With one hand, the vampire grabbed the chair behind him and swung it round at Raymond. Raymond didn't even get a chance to duck, but caught it right in the head. Chair and man went tumbling to the ground like so many sticks.

Zoe had no where to run. The man Crow, in fearful realization of his name, seemed grown bigger than life. He took one ominous step toward her. Zoe fumbled at her coat pocket and threw a handful of rice on the ground before the awful figure.

In another moment, he was upon her and had caught her up by the throat.

"Really? Am I supposed to count those now? And forget about killing you?"

Zoe's knees buckled. She would fall. She brought one knee up hard, and the two tumbled to the ground.

But she was no match for his unexpected strength and he soon had her pinned, his hands still at her throat. He threw back his head and cried upward — words she couldn't understand.

Zoe felt her throat closing as his hold tightened. And she found herself surprised at this — that she might just say this to herself at such a moment. *My throat is closing*. Surprised, but not panicked. Her heart did not pound in her chest. No

life force rose up and cried from within her. For she had no life to cling to.

She hardly even needed to let go — to let go.

Raymond's head spun. The chair had caught him in the head and the two had gone crashing to the floor. He knew something was happening, but he couldn't see straight. He grabbed what he could and struggled to his hands and knees.

Raymond brought the broken chair leg down with as much force as he could. He needed to hurt this man in order to stop him. But when it struck the man's back, the shaft of the wood met — not so much a wall of bone and sinew as — the crusted carapace of something terrible Raymond could not imagine. The wood pierced the flesh all too easily and sank into its body with a sickening sound.

Raymond staggered back. The vampire's body, all the force gone out of it, slumped forward over Zoe's inert form. A sickly sweet smell of asphodel filled the room.

Raymond pushed the vampire's body off. The ghastly end of the chair leg, gone clean through, stuck out of its chest.

Zoe lay there, lifeless. He knelt down and lifted her arm to check for pulse but then laid it back down again. He knew that didn't really make sense. He took a deep breath and gently pulled her eyelids open. Lifeless eyes, still, dead still. Nothing. He let them go and watched them close again.

Two bodies, broken furniture and a lot of noise had been made. Raymond needed to focus on next steps. If he was smart he would get out of there fast.

He reached over and brushed a strand of hair from Zoe's face. She seemed composed. Not really different than when she was alive — or as alive as he had ever seen her. He felt he should do something. It wasn't right just leaving her lying next

to her killer. He owed her that.

Probably he didn't have much time. Maybe just pull her off a way. That would be something. Raymond pushed an upholstered chair back out of the way and bent down and grabbed up her ankles to drag her off that way.

"Sorry about this, girl."

Zoe's eyes snap open. Raymond yelped and jumped back, dropping Zoe's heels hard to the floor.

"Ow-a!" Zoe's cry was lost in a choking cough for air.

"Holy Jesus! I thought you were dead."

Zoe's coughing spasm racked her body harder until at a certain point Raymond realized she was laughing and coughing at the same time.

Absurdly, he dropped to his knees and laughed too.

The two figures were stopped on the rise of the bridge. A slender quay ran here and on the far side, a midnight cafe was doing a little light business in the wee hours.

Zoe looked down at the dark vein of water. "There's probably water running underground all over the place."

"Hm. I guess so." He looked at her. "Is it okay we just left him there like that?"

Zoe didn't answer. She'd pulled open the curtains before they left. The morning sun would do the job for them.

"Sorry I killed your best lead."

"I don't think he really knew anything."

"How do you mean? That guy was for real. Spooky real."

"I know, but I think he didn't know either, just like I don't know. I mean how does anybody know? His answers, it was like he was making it up what to say.

"How do you figure?"

She put one hand up to her neck. "Choking. It's not really

one of the ways, you know."

"Oh." Raymond flicked a pebble into the water. "Well, he certainly wasn't expecting the likes of you."

"Looking for his next meal, more like."

"Ugh. Let's not even go there." Raymond turned around and rested his elbow on the railing. He looked down at his hands. "There was no blood."

"He was dead already."

"You don't seem dead already. If you don't mind my saying so."

"And I'd like to keep it that way. That's why I need to find this guy George Gordon."

Raymond looked at her, puzzled. She held out a business card and turned it in her hand — black on one side, dark red on the other. On the red side was handwritten the name 'George Gordon'.

"He had that on him?" Raymond nodded toward the café. "Sounds like a long night."

"Sounds like a plan."

chapter thirteen

Katie Quintero

RAYMOND LOOKED OUT THE window of his office onto Rue Favart, musing about the situation before him. Until recently he had been blissfully unaware of the existence of the supernatural and tracking down information about them certainly wasn't a normal part of his job description as a private detective. And if vampires weren't merely relegated to fantasy, what other terrors that go-bump-in-the-night were a part of his new reality?

Sitting down at his desk, Raymond began searching for information about George Gordon. A cursory online search provided little information about him - the few images he could find were all oddly dated, showing a man in his mid-thirties with the complexion of a drinker and severe bedhead, the unfashionable kind that looked like he'd literally just roll out of bed, as opposed to the contrived appearance which took half an hour and an obscene amount of product to accomplish.

A few boards and businesses also popped up, but some digging revealed Gordon was only loosely associated with any

of them. While presidents, CEOs and general managers dealt with the day-to-day operations of the companies, Gordon's name appeared buried on lists of investors or general committee members. He certainly had his fingers in numerous and diverse pies.

Finding an investment firm which included Gordon's name near the top of their board of directors, Raymond decided to call and see what information he could elicit from the receptionist.

"Hello, Banpiroa Investment Corporation. How may I direct your call?"

"To whom am I speaking?"

"Selene."

"Selene, I'm hoping you can help me. I'm trying to get a hold of George Gordon. Would you know the best way for me to go about doing that? Does he have an office in your building or a secretary I could speak with about setting up an appointment?"

"....."

"Selene?"

"I'm not sure to whom I can direct you. Mr. Gordon does not have an office here, nor does he visit often. "

"Is there someone in the managing director's office I could speak with?"

"Well...let me see if Eva is available."

Raymond tuned out the tinny strain of classical music that played while he waited on hold.

"Dario Boucher's office, Eva speaking."

"Eva, my name is Louis Raymond and I'm hoping you can help me. I need to speak with Mr. Gordon and have been unable to find any contact information for him. Do you have any you could share with me? Or do you know whom I could

“speak with to gain such information?”

“.....” Click.

“Hello? Eva?”

Frowning irritably at the phone, Raymond rose and walked into his barren reception area. With little information and fewer leads, Raymond felt his only choice was to appear in person at Banpiroa Investment in an attempt to garner any information possible. At least they couldn’t hang up on a person when they appeared in the flesh.

Walking out the front door of his office into the misty late afternoon, Raymond sauntered down the Rue Favart, past the other stone buildings that lined the street, toward the Boulevard des Italiens. Once he rounded the corner, he continued on to the Rue Laffitte, where he hailed a taxi. After providing the address of Banpiroa Investment Corps., he sat back and watched as Paris flashed by his window.

In the three years since he had moved to Paris from Vancouver, Raymond had slowly begun taking this historic metropolis for granted. With no companion to join him in discovering local haunts or roam through the innumerable museums and galleries filled with priceless art and sculptures, he’d begun to lose sight of what drew him to Paris in the first place.

As they rode along the Seine, Raymond allowed his eyes to wander over his surroundings. He deliberately appreciated the beauty of the Pont Alexandre III bridge - the ornate detail and art nouveau lamps - and the Flamme de la Liberté, the gold-leafed torch commemorating the friendship between the United States and France. Despite the light drizzle, the Debilly footbridge was crowded with tourists gawking at the Eiffel Tower, taking poorly curated photographs that would later be uploaded to Facebook or Instagram with the hashtags

#eiffeltower, #visitfrance and #americansinparis.

The taxi finally pulled up opposite the Banpiroa Investment Corps building. After settling with the driver, he gracefully slid off the bench seat, moving gingerly between the taxi and the stairs across from the office. With a build larger and several inches taller than the average Frenchman, Raymond had noticed minor inconveniences since moving to Paris. The architecture of the historic buildings and streets were definitely constructed to accommodate smaller conveyances and personages than the modern norm.

Straightening his suit jacket, Raymond flashed a charismatic smile in preparation to charm the information he sought out of whomever necessary. He strolled confidently into the main reception area, correctly assuming the twiggy blonde seated at the desk was the Selene he'd spoken with on the phone.

"Good afternoon. How can I help you?"

"Could you direct me to Dario Boucher's office? I'm his 5 o'clock."

"Up the stairs, down the hall to the left. His executive assistant Eva will be able to assist you."

"Merci."

Taking the steps two at a time, Raymond easily reached the second floor without becoming the least bit winded. Selene admired his athletic physique till he passed far enough down the hallway to be out of her line of sight.

Exuding magnetism and poise, Raymond approached Eva with the confidence of a man used to achieving whatever he set his mind to accomplishing.

"Bonsoir, Eva. We spoke on the phone earlier this afternoon. My name is Louis Raymond and I need to make contact with George Gordon. Is that something you can help

me with or, if not, would you be so kind as to direct me to the right person?”

The consummate professional, Eva took his abrupt entrance in stride, barely even blinking.

“I apologize for the call dropping earlier,” she said with a slight yet sophisticated French accent. “We’ve been having technological difficulties all day. And I’m afraid I am unable to assist you. Mr. Gordon does not keep an office here, nor do I have access to his contact information. I’m sorry you made the trip down here unnecessarily.”

As Raymond started to reply, the door behind Eva opened, revealing a spindly middle aged man with heavily lidded eyes. Holding the jacket which completed his three piece suit, he was clearly on his way out. His gaze swiftly inspected Raymond, assessing both him and the situation. Without breaking eye contact with Raymond, he directed his comment to Eva.

“I’m on my way out. Have the paperwork on my desk completed and properly filed by the morning. I will be in promptly at 7am.”

Eva nodded and rose, gently waving her hand in Raymond’s general direction.

“Mr. Boucher, this gentleman seeks an audience with Mr. Gordon. I explained this is not his office nor are we in regular communication with him.”

Ever observant, Raymond noted Boucher took in a quick, sharp breath, grimacing ever so slightly.

“And you are?”

“Louis Raymond, private detective. I need to speak with Mr. Gordon in regard to an issue I’m working on for a client.”

Boucher’s smile did not reach his eyes.

“Eva is correct, monsieur. Mr. Gordon is not directly involved with Banpiroa. He’s merely as an investor - a silent partner and member of our board of directors. He does not take appointments, preferring to maintain his privacy. I’m sure you can appreciate that. And as you have no further business here, I will escort you out.”

Turning with finality, Boucher proceeded down the hallway, while Eva walked into his recently vacated office. Raymond had no choice but to follow Boucher back down the stairs and toward the large frosted glass front door.

As he passed the reception desk, he threw Selene a smile and a cheeky wink, successfully receiving a coy look in return, ensuring he would be favorably received should he decide to return.

Immediately upon exiting the building, Boucher turned to Raymond, jabbing him in the chest with a boney finger.

“George Gordon does not like to be disturbed. I would counsel you to leave him in peace and stop trying to contact him.”

Before Raymond could open his mouth to respond, Boucher clambered into the chauffeured car waiting at the curb, unceremoniously leaving Raymond standing in the rain.

Once the limo had turned the corner and the taillights disappeared, Raymond shook a collection of rain droplets from his short hair and walked back into the reception area. Selene looked up from her desk as he approached.

“Is everyone so friendly around here or is it something about my face,” he asked, grinning.

“I see you caught Mr. Boucher on his way out. He can be rather abrupt.”

“I’m sure he’s a very busy man with a full schedule. If you don’t mind my asking, what can you tell me about George

Gordon? Not only has he been utterly inaccessible, but the man seems to be shrouded in mystery. I've been able to find so little background on him."

Selene looked uneasily toward the second floor hallway.

"I've never actually met Mr. Gordon. The board meetings are always late in the evening, long after I've left for the day. All I know is Mr. Gordon is rather reclusive and seldom appears in public."

Selene stopped abruptly, looking over Raymond's shoulder. He turned to see Eva standing on the second floor landing, blatantly eavesdropping on the conversation. Selene cowered slightly, shrinking into her seat. Raymond smiled up at Eva and offered a little wave before turning back to Selene.

"I appreciate your help, Selene. Bonsoir," he said as he headed for the door. When he reached it, he could feel Eva's eyes on his back, following him out.

The rain had stopped, so Raymond decided to walk a bit before calling it a night and heading for home. He decided to play tourist and wander down to the Avenue Foch toward the Arc de Triomphe. Spying a small but lively bistro, he decided to stop for dinner, ordering the freshly caught salmon and a bottle of passable Marsanne.

After sharing in a spirited debate with his fellow diners about the merits of soccer and Canada's growing relevance in the sport due to its increased popularity, Raymond decided to get some sleep before continuing his search for the elusive George Gordon in the morning.

His head pleasantly buzzing from the Marsanne, Raymond uncharacteristically failed to notice he was being followed until the assailant was upon him. Struck from behind, Raymond was thrown into the street, narrowly missing being hit by a passing Renault.

Leaping up, he frantically looked around, searching for his attacker. But the street was deserted, save for a lone taxi that had just turned down the street. Shaken, Raymond gained the driver's attention, collapsing into the back seat as he provided his address.

Unlocking his front door, Raymond entered cautiously, doing a complete sweep of the apartment before dropping onto his couch. He chided himself for being paranoid. Surely being thrust into the street was a coincidence, an unfortunate accident on a busy Paris evening. But as he thought back, he remembered he was the solitary occupant of the street and sidewalk until the taxi drove up. He shivered involuntarily and, after double checking to ensure his door and windows were locked, took a hot shower before climbing into bed and drifting off into a troubled sleep.

The next morning Raymond rose, preparing a quick breakfast before heading into the office. As soon as he turned down the Rue Favart, he knew something was wrong. While the entry to his office was set inside a stone doorway, blocking a direct view, he could tell by the shadows that door was ajar.

He approached the door with trepidation, slowly pushing it open to reveal the hallway which led to the reception area. He made his way down it cautiously, finding the desk overturned and the office supplies previously stored within lying scattered on the floor.

Bracing himself for the inevitable disarray, Raymond guardedly stepped over the threshold of his office and into the chaos that had previously been his meticulously spartan workspace. The three chairs which sat in front of his desk were smashed to pieces, covered in his files and stuffing from the lacerate couch. His desktop and phone had been swept from the desk and were lying in a jumbled mess on the floor.

Random papers were strewn about the room, layering the floor like giant white leaves after a windstorm. As he turned to completely survey the damage, he saw “stop digging, GG” splashed across the wall in what he hoped was red paint.

Not only had Raymond failed to track down George Gordon or acquire any real information about him, he had clearly made himself a target by seeking him out.

Becoming the recipient of a vampire’s ire was literally the last concern Raymond ever expected to encounter before this case!

chapter fourteen

Cindy Pinch

RAYMOND GIVES THE SCREW a final turn. Standing up from his crouch, he admires his handiwork.

“That should do it.”

He closes the door and turns the lock into place. He gives the knob a tug.

“Nomore Invader Ace Defender 9019, let’s hope you do a better job than your predecessor.”

Stooping to pick up the empty box, he scoops up the bits of trash and debris and puts them inside. He drops the box into the bin and sits down heavily on the grey couch adjacent the door. Leaning his head back, he pulls his phone out of his pocket. His back and neck ache from installing the new lock. He plays a round on his tower defense game before getting up and heading into his office.

The briefcase Raymond bought himself for his birthday last year leans against the large oak desk. He picks it up and sets it on the desk. He winces as the metal scrapes against the wood. He plugs in the combination, a series of numbers picked at random and the briefcase clicks open. Inside, the

briefcase is filled with carefully packed items. His extra security in case Gordon's goons come back. Crosses, cloves of garlic, and vials of holy water nestled in against the black velvet lining of the briefcase, along with several items made of silver.

Raymond rubs his hands together before reaching in and pulling out a vial of holy water and a cross with blue gems embedded into it. The cross came from a second-hand store. He wasn't sure if crosses would make a difference, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He wasn't sure about the holy water. But it was blessed by Saint Drausinus of Soissons, the patron saint of invincible people, and that sounded close to what Raymond was dealing with.

"Let's get to it then."

Raymond hides the cross in the flowerpot near the end of the hallway and another in the drawer of the reception desk. He hangs a large mirror on the wall behind the couch so that he can see if any visitors have a reflection. It takes Raymond an hour to hide various anti-vampire weapons around his office. For a final touch, he sprinkles holy water over the threshold. All that remains in the briefcase is a pair of silver chopsticks. He picks them up and heads out to the reception room to find a good hiding spot for them.

A knock on the door makes a cold sweat wash over Raymond. He pauses, looking at the door. Through the frosted glass he sees the outline of a person in a baseball cap. He takes a step towards the door, the sound of his shoe sinking into the plush carpet seems too loud. Another knock causes him to jump and swear.

"Get it together Raymond."

Chopsticks in hand, Raymond reaches the door and slowly unlocks the door. He opens it only a few inches, the

chopsticks gripped in his left hand that he hides behind his back. A teenage boy, face covered in acne, stands before him holding a plastic bag. The scent of garlic and marinara sauce wafts up towards him. The boy's baseball cap reads 'FoodDude'.

"I have an order for Louis Raymond." The boy says.

His eyes dart over Raymond's shoulder and a flash of curiosity crosses his face.

"That's me."

Raymond slips the chopsticks into his back pocket and reaches for the bag.

"Thanks." He says, closing the door before the boy can say anything else.

Clicking the lock back into place, Raymond heads to the couch and sits down to eat. He pulls out a styrofoam container of spaghetti and a small styrofoam cup of roasted garlic. The bread sticks, wrapped in wax paper, he lifts gently and wafts through the office like a sage stick before settling down to eat.

Voices outside the office wake Raymond up from a nap he hadn't intended to have. He gets up and heads up the hallway. Halfway to the door he realizes he forgot the chopsticks. He opens the door slowly and sees three teenagers arguing on the landing.

"Can I help you?"

A boy with gel-spiked hair quirks his mouth into a sneer before saying, "We're looking for Louis Raymond."

Raymond feels his grip tighten on the doorknob.

"Sorry, I'm not taking on any new clients at the moment."

He starts to close the door, but the boy with spiked hair puts his foot out and catches the door with his arm.

"We just have a few questions. It won't take long."

Raymond looks at the boy and the two behind him - a girl wearing an over-sized sweater and a boy with bushy black hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m not available at the moment. Perhaps you could come back another day.” Raymond waits for the boy to move his foot.

Instead, the boy pushes the door further open.

“Chill dude, it’s only a couple questions. We’ll be out of your hair in no time.”

With a sigh, Raymond pulls the door back to allow them through. As they walk down the hallway, he notes that they all have a reflection in the mirror. They might be human after all.

“It reeks in here.” The girl says, holding her sleeve up to cover her nose.

“If you don’t like the smell, you can leave.” Raymond offers.

He leans against the reception desk and crosses his arms, waiting. The kids just stare at him. The girl perches on the arm of the couch, oblivious to the smear of dirt she wiped on the grey fabric with her boot. The boy with the spiked hair sits in the center of the couch, leaning back with his arms out as if he owns the place. The other boy is staring at the painting hanging on the far wall.

“I like what you’ve done to the place.” The boy says, eyes roving the room appreciatively.

“What did you want to know?” Raymond asks. “I have a lot of work to get done.”

“Looks like you were taking a break to me.” The boy with spiked hair gestures towards the empty food cartons. “We’re looking for someone. I was hoping you might be able to help us.”

Raymond shakes his head.

“I already told you that I’m not taking on any new clients

right now. I don't have time to help you find anyone. I'm sorry."

"Oh," the boy says, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "We don't need you to find her. We just think you might have information that would tell us where she is."

"She?"

"My ex-girlfriend, Zoe Evans."

Nausea hits Raymond like a punch to the gut. What could they want with Zoe? His mind races as he tries to decide if they were sent by Gordon. Steadying himself with a breath, Raymond forces himself to stay calm.

"I'm not helping you track down your ex-girlfriend. I'm a private investigator not a stalker."

"I can pay you a lot of money." The boy tries to smirk but it's doesn't have the same confidence as before.

"I'm not interested in your money. I think it would be best if you left now." Raymond says through gritted teeth, trying not to let his anger show.

The boy leans back on the couch.

"I'm not ready to leave."

Stepping away from the desk, Raymond takes a step towards the couch.

"You need to leave," he says. "Now."

The boy stands up, fists clenched at his side.

"Or what, old man?"

The boy fills the space so that he is only inches away from Raymond - who struggles against the urge to punch the boy in the face. The two glare at each other. Raymond notices that the boy's eyes are set close together and one of them has popped a blood vessel. A loud thud pulls them apart. Raymond glances around the office, unsure of what to expect. He sees the other boy has knocked over the flower pot and

has spilled dirt all over the carpet.

“Sorry,” the boy stammers. “I’ll just, umm...”

His voice trails off as he picks up the flower pot and sets it upright. The cross with blue gems clatters to the ground and the boy picks it up and waves it around for a second as if unsure what to do with it.

“I’ll just,” he jams it into the dirt. “Put this here.”

He stands up and brushes his dirty hands on his pants, leaving streaks of brown on his white-wash jeans.

“Sorry ‘bout that.” He laughs and rubs the back of his neck, looking everywhere but at Raymond.

The girl gets off the couch and heads towards the hallway.

“Come on, Kade. Let’s just go. He isn’t going to help us anyway.”

The boy with spiked hair, Kade, stays still. There’s a hint of indecision on his face as he watches the girl make her way down the hallway. She gets to the door and grabs the handle.

“Shit,” she yells and pulls her hand away as if burned.

Kade rushes toward her. Raymond curses himself again for not grabbing the chopsticks.

“Are you okay?” Kade asks.

The girl holds up her hand, blood drips down to her wrist and onto the carpet.

“Do I look like I’m okay? I cut my fucking finger.”

Kade wraps an arm around her but she shoves him off.

“Let’s just go, Kade.”

Using the sleeve of her sweater, the girl uses her other hand to open the door and storms out of the office. Kade starts to follow but pauses in the doorway.

“Nash, let’s go.”

Raymond looks toward the other boy to see him stuffing his face with a leftover bread stick.

“Dude, seriously?” Kade shakes his head.

Nash blushes and heads down the hallway.

“Thanks for the snack.” He shouts over his shoulder before slamming the door shut.

Raymond waits exactly sixty seconds before grabbing his keys and wallet and following after them. A red BMW drives off. He recognizes Nash’s bushy hair in the backseat. Rushing to his car, Raymond starts the engine and speeds to catch up to them. They drive for twenty minutes before pulling up to an apartment building off of Avenue des Gobelins. The teenagers get out and rush up the stairs. Kade uses a key to open the door and then they slip inside. Raymond circles the block and finds a discreet parking spot. The building is in need of repair. The fire escape looks more dangerous than an actual fire. Bars block the windows and a thick grime discolours the bricks. They’re definitely up to something, he just isn’t sure what. He told Zoe he would help her and he’s a man of his word. Reclining the seat back, Raymond settles into his seat. If nothing changes by nightfall, he’ll make a new plan.

chapter fifteen

Tim Edwards-Hart

RAYMOND HAD ALWAYS FOUND it difficult to keep his attention from wandering during surveillance. He had developed all sorts of mind games to keep his brain focussed so he wouldn't pass out from boredom. One of his tricks was to create descriptions of his marks using five words or less. Apart from keeping him awake, he found he didn't need to refer to his photos as often in order to recognise the people later.

There were not many on today's list: 'Seashell Sally' because of her ears; 'Bobby Big Nose' had, despite Raymond's new nickname for him, only a slightly larger than normal nose, but his haircut reminded Raymond of a British policeman's hat so the name just flowed; 'Lumberjack Curls' had tight curly hair and wore plaid flannel. Raymond hadn't worked out a description for the young woman with the droopy eyelid or the middle-aged man in Lycra.

But there was something they all had in common. It was hard to define, but everyone entering the building had seemed odd somehow. It was such an odd thing to try to describe and Raymond still couldn't quite work out what it was they all

shared. He tried different words to try to catch what he sensed in them. There seemed hopeless, but not despairing; earnest, but simultaneously resigned. Regardless of their physical size, they all seemed small. They engendered a sense of disappointment. Based purely on their appearance as he watched them enter and leave the building, Raymond pitied them.

As twilight deepened, Raymond perked up. Someone new was leaving the building and she definitely did not look hopeless. There was something about the way she carried herself. She was confident, fearless even. She didn't seem to notice the people on the street around her. She didn't need to notice them: she moved through them — amongst them — with effortless disdain. It was like they were peasants and she was a queen. "No," Raymond corrected himself out loud, "they're cattle." Suddenly he understood. "She's a vampire."

Making a snap decision he got out of the rental car and followed her on foot.

The vampire went straight to the La Manufacture cafe on Avenue des Gobelins. Raymond began to doubt his choice – if she was a vampire, why go to a cafe? He hesitated, he wanted to get closer to see what she was doing, but if she was a vampire he might place himself at risk.

He checked his pockets. In his left trouser pocket was his mobile phone, along with two garlic cloves. In his right were two more - he figured he wanted to be able to reach them with either hand. The left pocket of his jacket held a small plastic container with a very tight seal containing some slightly crushed garlic. It seemed kind of silly to throw a small piece of plain garlic at a potential killer, so he had crushed some of it just in case it was the smell or the juice that had an effect.

His right jacket pocket contained a small canister of holy water with a pump spray cap. He had modified the pump so instead of creating a gentle mist it squirted a stream like a water pistol. In his inner left breast pocket was a wooden cross. He had torn a hole in the bottom of the pocket so the cross could hang down inside the lining. The top of the cross protruded enough that it could be visibly seen as a cross if he held his jacket open. Also, he had filed the bottom of the cross to a sharp point so that it could double as a wooden stake. Garlic, holy water, cross of Christ, and a wooden stake – just your regular everyday vampire hunting kit.

It felt good preparing his kit at home, but now he was standing in the street just a few meters from a suspected vampire, Raymond didn't feel quite so confident. His small armoury now felt kind of silly and he found himself wishing for a shotgun and military back up. That made him feel better, working on his own for so long he was *used* to that feeling.

Smiling, he walked up to the door of La Manufacture and stood in front of the display menu — which, he noticed with a snort, was printed in English. He pretended to consider the merits of staying for a meal while he scanned the interior. The cafe was close to full with people jostling each other at the bar by the door and waitresses threading through the throng with bottles of wine accompanying Burgundy snails, crispy chicken salad and cheeseburgers and fries. Despite the crowd, the target was easy to find. It was like there was a clearing around her, people just seemed to stay away. She was sitting at a table, alone, with nothing in front of her. Not even a glass of water. Who goes to a restaurant at night, in Paris, and doesn't even order wine? She had to be a vampire.

She was calmly staring at the door. Which meant, Raymond realised, she was looking right at him. He didn't

move. He knew better than rush, or to suddenly start ‘mime-reading’ the menu – beginners always overdo things like that and stand out because of it. Instead he, hesitated just a moment longer as if contemplating the meal options, then made a “tsk” sound as he turned and stepped back onto the street.

As soon as he had stepped passed the windows and was out of sight, he sidestepped into a doorway and pulled out his phone. Zoe had to know about this.

Zoe’s voice came on the other end. As he took a breath, she invited him to leave a message. His message was short, “Found one”. He gave the address two doors up from the cafe and placed his phone back in his pocket. For a moment, he watched the night crowd reflected in the window of the doorway where he stood. He had to work out what to do while he waited for Zoe, especially since he didn’t know how long she’d be. What if the vampire left? He turned to look for somewhere to sit where he could still see the cafe. As soon as he turned away from the reflection he knew he was in trouble — the vampire was standing in the doorway right behind him.

She spoke to him, in English, with an English accent. Educated. Or at least, Raymond thought, she made an effort to sound educated. “What have you found? Will you show me?” She gestured at the crowd reflected in the glass door and smiled as if she had made a joke.

Raymond let go of the phone in his pocket and pinched the garlic between his fingers. “Oh, it’s just over there.” He pulled his hand out as if to point, flicking the garlic towards her as he did. Except she wasn’t there. In the time it took him to flick his fingers, she had moved around his hand and with her left hand snatched both garlic cloves out of the air as he

threw them, then stepped behind his outstretched hand and grabbed it close to her chest with her right hand. She now stood by his shoulder, forcing his elbow to jut painfully out at angle as she held his hand tightly against her.

She whispered in his ear, “Garlic my love? How very French. But do you know what garlic might do to me?” Raymond tried to swallow, but he didn’t seem to have any saliva left as she continued, “Let me show you.” She raised her left hand in front of them both, opened it to show him the two garlic cloves, then clenched her fist until garlic started to squeeze out between her fingers. Opening her hand, he could see that she had crushed both cloves to a smooth paste. Moving slowly, she rubbed the paste over her right hand, smearing it over his hand at the same time.

She licked some of the paste out between her fingers. Leaning over, she licked it *onto* his upper lip, just below his nose so he could smell it. It was all he could smell. Then she wiped her left hand clean on his shirt.

“Now, what other treats do you have? I can smell them...”

Still holding his left hand in her right so tightly that it hurt, she reached into his left jacket pocket and pulled out the container of partly crushed garlic.

“Oh... you must really like garlic, but we’ve played that game and I like my way better.” She dropped the container to the ground and reached to his right jacket pocket.

“What’s this? You brought me perfume? Oh mon amour, you are so thoughtful.”

Raymond held his breath as she pointed the spray at herself. Pumping the cap, she directed the stream her right hand. Despite holding his hand in it, she managed to only hit her own fingers washing the garlic off herself, with the run-off dripping onto his now slightly numb fingers. Then she

squirted her tongue.

“Oh *God* that’s good. And you went to all that effort for me? What a *saint*.” Dropping the canister beside the garlic, she asked, “What else do you have?”

She moved quickly, suddenly standing in front him. She still held his left hand in her right but instead of it being pressed tightly against her chest and pulling his elbow into the air, she’d pulled his arm out straight and rotated his wrist so hard that he could feel his elbow hyper-extending towards the ground. He’d learned a few moves over the years, but he had nothing on her – even if he could match her speed and strength, in this position he could do nothing other than try not to move in case she chose to snap his arm.

She pulled his jacket open and gave a mock cry, “Oh no! Lord have mercy, is that a crucifix?” She smiled a smile that was all mouth and teeth, with none of it reaching her eyes as she continued, “No, it’s just a cross. A crucifix has Christ on it. Do you know how much difference that makes to me?” She switched his jacket closed. “None.”

“I like you. In fact, I think I’ll keep you. I’m just not sure whether to keep you as a pet, or for supper.” She paused to lick her lips and gave another cold smile. “Oh, but why choose, you can be both! Tell you what, I won’t eat you here. If you can stay alive until we get home, I might save you for later. Perhaps you could do some ‘services’ for me.” Looking at her smile, Raymond thought of the people he’d seen entering the building earlier in the day. He didn’t know what the services might be, but he had a pretty good idea of what it might mean.

“Well, time to go.” She stepped forward, twisting Raymond around at the same time so that he faced the door. In the same action she reached past him, punching two holes

in the edge of the door with a double staccato. The latch and the lock fell onto the floor and the door swung open.

As they stepped into one of the back rooms, Raymond's phone rang.

"Is that your female friend? Oh don't look at me like that. I can hear your heartbeat, don't think I couldn't hear the earpiece of your phone."

The ringing stopped.

"I wonder if she's as much fun as you."

"Oh, I think you'll find I'm much more fun", Zoe's voice came from the doorway behind them.

The vampire dropped Raymond's hand and with a speed that was astonishing to see, leapt towards Zoe, fingers reaching for Zoe's throat. She was as surprised as Raymond when Zoe side stepped the outstretched hand with blistering pace. To Raymond, Zoe seemed to blur as she ducked into the oncoming vampire, lifting her off her feet as Zoe's momentum carried them both back towards Raymond.

Raymond could barely feel his left hand, but his right hand was fine. He grabbed the top of the cross and, holding it like a sword, drew it out of his jacket pocket. Without thinking, he braced it on his left forearm as he pointed it at the bodies rushing towards him and closed his eyes. There was a sickening crunch and the cross was ripped from his hands.

Opening his eyes, he saw the vampire on the ground with the cross sticking out of her back. Horrified, he watched her try to reach around and grab it.

Zoe grabbed the vampire, hauled her to her feet, and ran backwards across the room dragging the vampire with her. At the last moment, Zoe spun around and pushed the vampire into the wall. The impact forced the cross so deep into the

vampire's back that the spike came out through her chest.

For a brief moment, there was stillness. Raymond found himself waiting for the vampire to pull the cross out of her own chest. Instead, the vampire slumped to the floor.

“She’s dead,” Zoe said. “Let’s go.”

chapter sixteen

Dria Defoi

RAYMOND AND ZOE SAT in the dark of the basement storage room of la Manufacture. Although the sun wasn't fully up yet, the café above was beginning to be illuminated with the gray of pre-dawn twilight.

"Well bullocks. Do you think the café owners will find us if we stay here until sundown?" Zoe asked, sitting on a bag of coffee beans.

Raymond sat against the wall across from her. "We have bigger problems if we wait 'til then. Who's to say other vampires won't show up and be just as friendly as our bud back there?"

Zoe shuddered. "Maybe you should just leave then. I'm trapped here, but you're not."

"I'm not leaving you until I get you somewhere safe. Think of it as professional integrity," Raymond replied gruffly. "We're pretty close to a metro station. If I bring you back an overcoat or a burka, maybe we can make a dash for it."

"Oh, no we won't! I don't know how this vampire thing works. Maybe even a tiny bit of filtered sunlight and I'll melt,"

Zoe exclaimed helplessly.

Raymond laughed. “I think that’s witches and water.”

“You know what I mean!”

They sat silently for a moment, thinking. Finally, Raymond broke the silence. “There might be one thing, although I’m not positive it’ll be an option.”

“It’s not like we have a whole lot of ideas,” Zoe replied with some snark.

“The city of Paris is on top of a network of old mines and tunnels, some of which were used as ossuaries back in the day. You might have heard of the catacombs?”

“Yes,” she replied sadly. “Kate and I had talked about going but the Yelp reviews said the line was usually 2 hours long.”

“That’s the tourist part. The rest of it has been used by smugglers, rioting students, resistance fighters, basically anyone who wanted to get anywhere unnoticed. But as you might expect, the city isn’t too fond of that—besides, with cave ins and various other incidents, they’re probably worried about getting sued.”

Recognition dawned in Zoe’s face. “Ah, I think I’ve heard of this. They’ve blocked all the entrances, right?”

Raymond smirked. “It’s a tough job. There are a lot of entrances they don’t know about. Besides, they need to access them for maintenance sometimes, running cable lines and such.”

Zoe perked up, feeling hopeful for the first time since she’d woken up as a vampire. “I take it by your expression you know where such an entrance is?”

“As to that,” Raymond started, his expression darkening, “I know they run under the 14th and 13th arrondissement. I heard about a party in a bunker under Place d’Italie a while back.

There should be some entrances, but we can't exactly stroll around lifting up manhole covers."

"You said they're used for maintenance, right?" Zoe said thoughtfully. "Do you think there'd be access in the garage under the movie theater next door?"

Raymond looked at her. "There might be."

"Can we get from here to there without going into the sun?"

Raymond nodded. "I think I saw a sign for a direct entrance to the garage from the café as well. Makes sense they'd take advantage of the city parking. But, we're going to have to break some laws to do this. The least of which is turn-style jumping when we get into the metro station directly from the catacombs."

"As a dead woman, they can't very well prosecute me."

"Are we sure this is safer?" Zoe asked, nervously glancing at the damp tunnel walls. "This place seems like it'd be crawling with vampires." She and Raymond had broken open a maintenance door on the lowest level of the garage. He'd pulled a torch out of his pocket.

"You'd be more likely to find some of your customers down here. Rave kids and other idiots calling themselves 'cataphiles'. Lost tourists, sometimes," Raymond replied, seemingly unphased by the bent over position he had to maintain.

"You seem awfully comfortable yourself," Zoe countered. "Done your share of molly in the Paris underground?"

Raymond didn't answer, stopping as they reached a fork. In one direction lay an open, reinforced tunnel veering west. In the other, a craggy slit in the wall gaped darkly at them, sand spilling out at their feet.

“A fair number of missing persons cases,” he replied, turning to face her, “End with me finding the remains of identifying clothing around partially buried skeletons in some crawl down here.”

Zoe swallowed nervously. She wished she had her own torch, but damn these girl pockets. “Why do I get the feeling you’re about to tell me something I won’t want to hear?”

“We have two choices. The city tried to fill our direct path,” Raymond started, gesturing at the crevice with his torch. “But as far as we can see, it’s open. It’ll be a tight, sandy crawl, and dangerous. That’s usually why they fill these old mine shafts.”

“I’ll vote for the other option then.”

“It won’t get us to the subway at Place d’Italie,” Raymond replied with a scowl. “We’ll get away from this place but we might hit other obstacles and I’m not 100% in my ability to navigate us. I don’t know about you but I’d like to get home sometime today.”

Zoe grimaced. “I thought you said the other option was potentially dying! I don’t want to do that again!”

Raymond pointed the torch down the open passage. “Well then. The longer we wait here, the more sewer air I’ll have to inhale. Let’s get going.”

The two crept along the dark passage in silence for a time. The drips of condensation echoed through the abandoned mine shaft, part of the network underneath Paris known more broadly as the Catacombs. The brown stone of the walls gave the appearance of a natural limestone cave, but bracings of wood and metal provided exceptions to that illusion. Abruptly the passage opened up, revealing a larger bunker-like gallery.

As the light from Raymond’s torch fell on the far wall, Zoe gasped in awe. “This is better than Banksy!” She exclaimed,

running forward to examine the graffiti mural illuminated by their light. “Do you see the technique?”

Raymond didn’t respond, so Zoe turned around to look at him. He put a finger to his lips.

“What is it?” She whispered loudly. “Is something there?”

Raymond sighed and reached into the shadows, pulling a scrawny figure to the floor at their feet by his hemp sweater. “What are you doing?” He demanded.

The man held up his hands in a gesture of innocence. “Hey, man, I’m just exploring the beauty of Paris’s underground. Chill out.” A white man of about thirty, the dirty dreads of his hair was held back by the strap of an unlit headlamp. A scraggly beard, hiking sandals, and American accent added to the ex-pat backpacking through Europe vibe. “Name’s Joker.”

Raymond released him with a sound of disgust. “Get out of here.”

Joker stood up, brushing at his clothes as if the dust from the floor of the room had made any difference to the appearance of his attire. “Haven’t seen you all down here before.”

“No,” Raymond responded curtly.

“Do you know who painted this?” Zoe asked, curiosity outweighing her concern that this Joker was an unfriendly vampire who had followed them into the catacombs. “I’m a graphic designer, and I’ve always been interested in street art.”

“Sure,” Joker nodded, grinning. “I did! I can show you some more stuff over near the Dragon Room. Do you mind getting your feet wet?”

“Thanks but no.” Raymond said with a growl.

Joker took a step back with a frown. “Just offering man, not trying to take your girl.”

“He’s my, uh, business associate. But actually,” Zoe mused, pausing briefly, “We’re a tiny bit lost. Well, we know where we came from, but we’re not sure how to get where we’re going.”

The smile returned. “And where’s that?”

“Any Metro station, really. We, uh, would like to avoid attention.”

Joker’s smile widened, cracking the layer of dust on his skin. “I get it man, we’ve all been there. I know a backway into D’enfer.” He glanced nervously at Raymond. “Assuming you aren’t the gendarme or anything.”

“If I was the gendarme, I couldn’t bash your skull against the wall,” Raymond muttered under his breath. “Don’t tempt me.”

“We’re not, thank you!” Zoe replied, hastily trying to cover the private detective’s words. “Is the Dragon Room on the way?”

Joker nodded. “It’s about 250 meters once we crawl through that entrance over there. We can leave the meathead behind if it’s too frustrating for him.”

Zoe laughed awkwardly. “Oh, he grows on you. Lead the way.” Joker turned on his headlamp and began crawling between two sheets of rock. She grabbed Raymond’s arm as he started forward. “I know you want to make sure I’m safe before you leave me, but even once we get to the tube, my hotel is a 3-minute walk from the Madeleine station.” She laughed again. “At the beginning of this trip, I thought that was so close! I’ll have to wait until it gets dark before I leave the station. Might as well look at some art while we’re down here?”

“I’m not convinced this Joker character isn’t going to try to rob us. I’m certainly not going to leave you with him,” Raymond replied glowering.

“You really are a big softie, aren’t you?” Zoe teased before following after Joker.

The mural on the walls of the gallery room Joker brought them to was illuminated with flickering candlelight. It depicted a tiger ripping out the throat of a naked woman with a backdrop of French flags. “Look at the composition!” Zoe exclaimed. “I take it the artist isn’t happy with the country’s ‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité?’”

Joker nodded sagely. “Rapunzel wants to take back the city, one mural at a time. He usually comes by the Salle de Cabinet at some point midday—he keeps his paints nearby and we have some candles and party favors stashed. I can introduce you.”

“I’d love to,” Zoe replied. “Raymond, what do you want to do? I think it’s safest to stay down here for a while.”

He grunted his consent. “Any charcuterie in with the party favors?” Zoe glanced at him. He was flagging, having not eaten or slept in a while. That’s right! She hadn’t either, but she didn’t feel hungry. Was this a vampire thing?

“Sure, man.” Joker responded. “We’re 100% freegan and we have some great sources.”

Raymond groaned, but they proceeded further into hell, following their modern Virgil.

Dirty and educated in the Parisian underground art scene, Zoe and Raymond were eventually lead to Denfert-Rochereau Metro station, emerging in a maintenance tunnel and waving goodbye to Joker.

The two took the 4 line but parted ways at Chatalet, where Zoe transferred to the 14. “I can get home from here,” she told Raymond. “I appreciate your looking out for me, but I’ve already taken your whole day. It’s sundown now. I can make

my own way back to the hotel.”

Zoe made it to the Hotel de l’Arcade late, just as true night started, finally safe.

chapter seventeen

Chelsea Fuchs

IT HAD SEEMED LIKE such a great idea. A few days in Paris. And now Zoe was stuck with the views of the Paris lights and no more. At least she had found Raymond.

Zoe stayed away from the sliver of death ray peeking through the window. They'd have to do something about that after sunset. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and sighed. Nothing, again. Not a fucking thing.

At least she had her laptop to keep her entertained until nightfall. After all, she might be undead, but she still had bills to pay. And since her life span appeared to be extended until who knew when, assuming she could avoid death rays and whatever else may kill vampires, she needed to start building her nest egg.

But first she needed to see what progress Raymond had made on the whole vampires they hadn't killed front.

Raymond rubbed his hands over his eyes. The sandy sensation in his eyes testified to his sheer exhaustion. The grit from the

last day was seeped into his pores. He needed a solid eight hours of sleep after the night he'd just had. Short of that, he needed a hot shower and a shot of espresso. No, make that two shots. Turns out vampires weren't anything like *Twilight*.

He rested his head on the back of his chair before eyeing his couch ruefully. Why hadn't he bought a more comfortable one? Would it be worth stretching out across? Even just for a catnap?

Before he was able to weigh the pros and cons of such a decision, he heard heavy footsteps and the creaking of the outer office door. Two thugs walked into his office.

"You Louis Raymond?" The shorter and pudgier of the two asked.

Raymond knew the look of these two. Minor minions at the best. Definitely pains in the ass. Who else would be sitting in his chair, in his office, during office hours? Santa Claus? But showing his frustration would do nothing to further his current situation and he didn't need to add healing from a scuffle to his list of things to do today.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" Raymond asked as he edged his way around his desk into a better position. The best offense was a good defense and these boys looked like trouble.

"The Boss," the big one started. The little one cleared his throat. "That is to say, The Big Boss wants to see that little lady type friend of yours."

The little one elbowed his way around the other. "What my associate here is trying to say is that Mr. George Gordon would like the pleasure of your client's company this evening."

The feeling that seeps in when you're just a little too close to danger for any degree of self-preservation began at the base of his spine and hit Raymond full on at the base of his head. He didn't like where this was going. If his research was right,

and of course it was right, this George Gordon wasn't just The Big Boss, he was the top dog, the king of the hill, THE vampire in Paris. He would be able to answer some, if not all of Zoe's questions, but to what end? What was the price of admission? For Zoe and for himself?

"I'll pass on the invitation, but she gets to set the location. Give me your number and I'll text you the address by noon." Raymond grabbed a sticky note and pen and threw it at the smaller one. He seemed to be the brainier of the two.

"Very well. Mr. Gordan will be pleased with your cooperation."

When you were dealing with the head of the Paris vampire syndicate, could you do anything less than agree?

The short one scribbled the number down and Raymond picked up his phone and called it, just to make sure. A cell phone rang and Raymond hung up before it connected. He nodded his head in dismissal and the smaller one took the hint and started towards the door. The larger thug lingered, until he realized he was being left behind and made a beeline for the door.

Raymond watched the two men leave his office and took his phone from the desk. The shower and nap would have to wait, but that didn't mean the coffee had to. He strolled down the street to a little cafe on the corner and grabbed some coffee. The sweet smell of crepes called to his overworked and underfed senses. He grabbed two of them and with the promise of at least one of his most basic needs being met in the near future, he allowed his mind to wander. How had he gotten himself into this position? A private investigator for a vampire? This was the type of thing nightmares were made of.

He took a seat at an open cafe and began going through

his contacts. Who could he ask about George Gordon? He'd already caused some unintended consequences with his investigation. If you could call two undeads suddenly becoming corpses unintended consequences. He once again rubbed his hands over his tired eyes. He was going to need a vacation when this was all said and done. On the beach, or maybe Yuma, Arizona. He'd heard they had sun for over half the day, year-round. Or perhaps Antarctica, where the sun doesn't set for a couple of weeks near Christmas. Not that he'd googled it or anything. In the middle of the day, while he sat in a puddle of sunlight.

He'd never ran from a fight before, but he'd never dealt with the undead before either.

After a few phone calls and more than one awkward hang-up, he had some answers. Not answers that he liked. Far more warnings than he'd expected, but answers non the less.

It was time to make the call he'd been dreading. He pushed the button to connect and stretched his legs out in front of him. He needed to sound calmer than he felt. She had asked him for help. He couldn't just walk away now.

"Hello?"

Why does everyone always answer their phone like they don't know who is on the other side? It had been a lifetime since the time before caller id and yet everyone still answered their phone like they didn't know who was on the other side.

"Hey, Zoe."

"Oh hi, Raymond!" Zoe answered, her excitement clearly faked.

He could hear the worry under the forced words.

"So, I've found someone for you to talk to. I think you'll be

able to get your answers tonight.”

“Really?” Now that was real excitement. “And you don’t think they’ll attack again?”

He knew she couldn’t see his shrug, but it was an automatic response. “All we can do is meet in a more public place this time and be prepared.”

Prepared. Did holy water only work on vampires who had been baptized? Or not at all? Or did it work some of the time, or not any of the time? He had not signed up to be a vampire hunter.

“I think a ground level restaurant would be best. It would give us an easier escape, if—”

“If they attack us. Yeah, I get it.”

“Do you have any places you would like to go?” Raymond asked as he began to mentally run through the streets of Paris.

“It doesn’t really matter. It’s not like the food really matters.” He could hear the pain in her voice. This must really suck.

“What sort of attire do you have? Some of these places can be pretty swanky.”

“I’ll have to see what Kate had packed. Fashion isn’t really my thing.”

They had agreed to meet at his office at 10pm in the event that any rays might do Zoe harm. Raymond heard her approach but was busy searching the internet for any other information he could gather on George Gordon or Gordon George. Records were all over the place and his three-hour nap had done nothing to clear his mind or the confusion. This guy was a fucking fairy godmother in some reports and the devils right hand man in others. Raymond had no idea what they were getting themselves into.

When he finally did look up, the sight in front of him took his breath away. Zoe was not wearing her typical jeans and a tee shirt.

“What do you think?” she asked as she did a slow turn.

“*Sans*,” slipped out of his mouth before he could stop himself. Lust personified was standing before him. He took a gulp of air before he continued. Absently he pulled at the collar of his dress shirt.

“Um.” His brain had short-circuited and the blood was flowing to places it didn’t need to be flowing. “Well, that’s not your normal, um wardrobe.”

“Will it do though?” Zoe asked. He didn’t think she could blush in her current vampire condition, but he was certain that if she could, she would be.

“You look fine.” No emphasis on the word fine. But she did look *fine*. “It will work for tonight. Where did you find,” he moved his hand to indicate the dress. “That?”

“Funny thing, it’s actually part of our clothing line. You know slutdress.com apparently ships to Paris.”

“Good to know.”

Raymond called for a cab and soon they were on their way to their date with destiny. Or rather George Gordon.

Raymond had chosen a small little restaurant next to a busy street. The tables were outside and although the crisp night air should have sent everyone running for indoor tables, the bustling night life kept the people watchers outside. There was a small barrier of plants that kept the restaurant separate from the passing street life, but it would be an easy escape if the moment called for it. They were shown to a table next to the building, with a tall metal fence to one side. They were boxed in on the left by buildings, but there would still be enough

room to run if the occasion called for it. A slightly overweight man dressed in a respectable suit rose to meet them.

“Bonsoir, young lady.” The man they assumed was George extended his hand across the table.

Raymond looked down at the hands of George Gordon. A lot could be discovered by a man’s hand. For a brief instant the skin on his hands appeared almost translucent in the moonlight night, like an old piece of fine china. How old was this scum of the undead underbelly anyways? If the cut of his hair gave any indication, this guy must be ancient. Did vampire hair continue to grow? Or did they stay exactly the same as the day they turned? Weren’t vampires supposed to be better looking after they turned? If that was the case, then this guy must have been beaten with an ugly stick in his childhood. Slightly overweight and white as a bed sheet, he looked more ghost than vampire in the moonlight. Except for his ruddy cheeks. And that hair. The wave to his unfashionable messy hair made Raymond wonder if along from staying away from the sun, he also stayed away from any form of adult interaction. They were in Paris after all, the fashion capital of the world. Hadn’t he gotten the memo? He looked to be mid 30’s but sounded ancient.

Zoe shook the outstretched hand and George turned and shook Raymond’s. It was like shaking hands with a block of ice. George signaled for them to take their seats. The feeling of dread still pricked at the base of Raymond’s skull as he pulled out the seat next to him for Zoe to sit. She gracefully poured into her seat before elegantly placing her napkin in her lap. Raymond followed suit and casually glanced around the outdoor restaurant. The tables were filled, but not by romantics taking a late evening meal. No, one misstep and Zoe

was going to be in a world of hurt.

He could see Zoe rolling and unrolling the list of questions she had painstakingly crafted while she'd waited for the sun to go down.

George waved off the waiter and Raymond inwardly groaned. He had known they wouldn't be enjoying a meal, after all, he was the only one who now needed the traditional form of nourishment. The passing plate of potatoes au gratin and a thinly sliced steak sent his mouth watering. He was tired, he was hungry and he was starting to get pissed. He hated games and right now he felt like they were playing the ultimate game of cat and mouse.

"Mr. Gordon." Raymond said as he straightened in his chair. It was time to start the next round of the game.

George reached for his wine glass. "Please, call me George. We're all friends here." He gestured to the tables around him, the wine sloshing out of the glass. It pooled on the white table cloth like blood. Raymond's first impressions had been correct. Damn.

"We are friends, Ms. Evans, are we not?" George continued. "How is your brother doing?"

Double damn. Raymond hadn't been the only one doing research. George swirled his wine again before taking a sip.

"I'm not sure." Zoe mumbled under her breath. She was now clinching her list.

"You know, I'd really appreciate it if you would leave my friends alone. It breaks my heart when I hear that there has been a body found in strange condition. One does not simply leave corpses lying around." George took another sip of his wine. He turned to his man. "This is simply wonderful *Henri Jaye Richebourg Grand Cru*. You must give some to my guests."

Raymond wanted to refuse, but he knew they were in a

position to refuse nothing. The man came by and poured the 15,000 £ bottle of wine into Raymond and Zoe's glasses. Raymond picked up his glass and cheered his host. The wine burned on the way down. His nerves were on high alert and getting sloshed on wine that would cover his living expenses for months just didn't sit right on his empty stomach.

"Now," George continued as Zoe and Raymond suffered through their ridiculously expensive glass of wine. "If you were to leave my friends alone, we'll call it quits."

"Of course." Zoe readily agreed. "We never intended to hurt your friends in the first place. And it won't happen again."

George eyed Raymond.

"The lady is the boss. What she says, goes."

George took another sip of his wine and Raymond wondered if the wine glass was magic, it never seemed to empty. "That is all I can ask for. You may go."

Two men appeared behind Zoe and Raymond and they were being helped out of their chairs and towards the street. Zoe's list, clutched tightly in her hand, would not be examined tonight.

A cab waited for them at the entrance of the restaurant and Raymond requested they be let off at the Eiffel Tower.

In no time at all they were let out in front of one of the most romantic places on earth and Raymond paid the fare. Raymond could feel his heart racing and knew Zoe could hear it.

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked as they made their way through the crowd of people.

"We're being tailed."

Zoe nodded her head. "I don't think he's going to just let us go. I think he's going to come after us anyway." Raymond agreed. They weaved their way in and out of the crowd,

walking through buildings and around corners until Raymond was confident, they had lost their tail. They made their way back to his office, which was at the very least being watched if not bugged. The place was trashed. Someone had been there, and hadn't found what they were looking for. Of course, they wouldn't, this wasn't the first time his place had been tossed. And if they survived this, it wouldn't be the last.

"Raymond?" Zoe said as she worked her lower lip. The list of questions still clutched in her hand.

"Yes?"

"You need to leave town for a bit."

"I agree."

chapter eighteen

LG Red

ZOE SLOPPED HER GLASS of wine on Kate. “You’re all plot,” she said. “Your arse is so tight you couldn’t take a shit without plotting it out first. For me, a story is — you go in there, you meet your characters and you see where they take you.”

“Right,” Kate said, her voice tight. Zoe expected her to pour white wine, then soda water on the spreading wine stain. From her face, she was damned if he would. Still... cashmere...

“I mean, look at Nôtre Dame. Who’d have thought there were beehives on the roof?” said Kate. “Wouldn’t you use that?”

Stop! Stop, Zoe, she told herself. The conversation is in my head. Kate is dead. Poor Kate’s body was in the morgue behind her, lying on a slab.

Zoe herself was now a vampire, and had just concluded the weirdest conversation of her life... her death, she reminded herself — with pleasantly-plump vampire mob boss George Gordon.

Her face, actually, was pressed against the wood of a

gigantic door. Oak, her mind informed her. From Forêt de l'Oise. *Blood from a thousand sacrifices soak my every knot, my sisters make the roof of their accursed cathedral...* the wood spat.

Oh come on. Nonsense. Doors don't talk to me. Zoe stepped briskly back and slipped her iPhone from the pocket of her jeans. She googled 'Paris Morgue', and found it immediately. Institut médico-légal de Paris was on quai de la Rapée, in the 12th arrondissement. "Easy peasy," she said aloud, pleased. The route back to the hotel was all along the quays northwest, then, hop, turn right along fontaine des Mers — carefully skirting the water, oh, no, no, she wasn't crossing any water, no sirree, she'd heard about that. Then it was straight up place de la Concorde to the Madeleine (*A temple to the Revolution, till those Christian bastards stole it* said the door, crackling on the word 'Chêtiens').

God, she felt great. She stepped through the door — without opening it, she noticed as the phone dropped out of her hand and smacked on the floor inside. She stepped back through, kicked it under the door and picked it up again outside.

"OK, Zoe," she said, and set off confidently northwest. After a few steps she screeched to an unnerved halt. "Oh, fuck!" The water was on her right, meaning she was on the left bank. She'd have to cross it to get back to the hotel.

A passing lady tut-tut-tutted, and muttered "Pas bien-élevé!"

Well, fuck me sideways, I understand French now! "Va te faire enculer!" she suggested, and the stiff hairstyle of the woman crimped even further as she stiffened and stalked away.

Okaaaay, Zoe told herself. I can do this. I can't cross water, obv. But there has to be a workaround. God, she was starving.

She turned in a circle, and stopped, entranced. The Eiffel

Tower was doing its thing - lit up for the evening. As she watched, it went from plain lighting to a joyous sparkle from top to bottom of the tower that lit up the Paris sky.

“Height,” she said. “If I get up high enough I can cross, I’m sure.”

A slim, tall man turned back as he passed her. “You want to go high?”

“No,” Zoe said absently, looking at the pulse throbbing in his throat, such a beautiful pulse— “No drugs, thank you.” She licked her lips. Maybe just a little sip?

He threw his head back and laughed, showing that beautiful pulsing throat to its best advantage. Zoe gasped and fixed her eyes on his lips. “Madame, les montgolfiers, the hot air balloonists, are making expeditions for all those who love Paris, from la cathédrale Nôtre-Dame, beside us here, across to place de la Concorde this evening.”

“Perfect!” She drew her eyes away reluctantly and he went on his way, leaving a lingering scent of lavender and fresh blood tormenting her nostrils. She gulped away her mouthwatering and made confidently for the cathedral.

She expected to feel fear, perhaps a burning sensation, illness, as she approached that home of Christianity, but felt nothing except a slightly queasy tummy. And there they were — two balloons swaying in the moonlight, with a long queue of tourists waiting, licking their ice creams from Berthillon. Her awakened senses smelt cassis, black chocolate, créole vanilla.

But something was bothering her. Something she could hear but not see. A whistle, a soft whistle, whistling a tune she remembered from her childhood. Her mind sounded out the words:

O, I met with Napper Tandy, and he took me by the hand

*Saying 'How is poor old Ireland and how does she stand?'
'She's the most distressful country that ever yet was seen,
For they're hanging men and women for the wearing of the green.'*

She turned. A man was close behind her, she saw the gleam of his teeth as he ducked out of an archway. She hurried a little.

He was still there, at the same distance. And he was wearing green, she saw as he passed under a street light. A green coat, a high white stock around his throat, fawn trousers and rather flashy buckled shoes. His face was somehow ghastly, his cheeks hollow and his eyes — as green as her own — haunted, and fixed on her.

She stood transfixed. He stopped. A man came out of a house and stopped too, by the man following. He held a sprig of springing green oak in his hand.

The man in green gave a broad grin of delight. "My man Polidori!"

"What do I hold in my hand?" the man Polidori asked the man in green.

"A green bough."

"Where did it spring?"

"In the United States of America."

"Where did it bud?"

"In France."

"Where will you plant it?"

"In the crown of England."

As the man in green reached gladly to take the twig, Zoe saw a flash as he fell, clutching a throat from which gore poured, reddening his white stock. The other man, the man he had called Polidori, turned and smiled at Zoe confidently. "We English 'ave to look after each other, Zoe," he said. He wiped the knife on his trousers and jumped for her.

She ran.

She raced past the tourists, gasping. They all turned to watch her, but as she cried, “Help me! Help me!” They stared, turned their heads slowly and backed away.

Zoe saw the balloons swaying above their baskets, ahead of her, the nearest with a Union Jack flirting on the billowing silk. She got her hands on the basket and hauled herself in — weren’t there sandbags or something you threw out to make it rise? — but there was nothing, apart from herself the basket was empty. Another man was running towards her, shouting “Hé! Arrête ça!” But ahead of him was — she felt herself towed — the man with the knife. He was pulling the rope of the balloon’s anchor hand-over-hand, that smile still fixed on his face.

She grabbed the rope — bringing herself nearer to Polidori — but then she saw the flame feeding the hot air into the balloon. She dragged the rope up and held it in the flames, hissing at the pain, and it burned through faster than she could have imagined. She let go and the balloon jumped into the air.

The owner jumped from below, wailing in despair “Halte! Halte! Voleuse!” and the crowd surged forward, shouting too, knocking the knifeman to the ground. She held the edge of the basket as the balloon soared up and over the river — not a bother on me, she gloated as it flew just above the surface of the river, then up again.

Far below, the knifeman Polidori was racing towards the bridge. He crossed halfway and looked up. The tut-tutting woman passed him by. With a relaxed gesture he reached over, wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and sank his teeth into her throat. Zoe stared down, hunger and disgust fighting in her, her mouth again watering. “Don’t be stupid,” she muttered to herself, “he’d be drinking my blood next.”

The balloon was sinking — she could see place de la Concorde ahead — when she heard a pop, then another, and the basket jerked. The breeze turned — she was being blown back. “No, no, no, no, no!” There must be some way of steering the thing. She pulled at the ropes, but that made the air spill out faster. It caught on the north tower of Nôtre Dame and sagged there. In the basket, she was perhaps five metres from the ground.

Polidori was still lounging on the bridge, tucking, she saw, a neat pistol into his waist.

She got over the edge of the basket, than hand-over-hand on what was left of the burned anchor rope; she was still a balcony’s length from the ground. She let go and fell. The balloon surged upwards a little, snagged again.

She ran, but the cathedral’s grounds were confusing, guarded with railings and walls. The knifeman walked around outside, smiling in at her.

“Get away from me, you,” she said. “I have a bargain with Gordon.”

“Byron?” Polidori’s smile widened. “Many’s the woman who trusted that fellow and soon found out her mistake. *My days are in the yellow leaf; the flowers and fruits of love are gone; the worm—the canker, and the grief, are mine alone!*” he said, and sniggered.

She vaguely recognised the verse. “Oh stop this,” she told him. “What do you want from me?”

“Let me introduce myself,” he said, with a fancy twirl of his hand and a sweeping bow. “John William Polidori’s the name. Duelling’s my business. I challenge you—” and he peeled off one black chamois glove and slapped her lightly on one cheek and then the other, letting the glove drop between them— “to a duel this night.”

“Are you out of your tiny mind?”

It was then that she realised that she was standing beside the holy water font. She edged closer to it.

Polidori made no answer, but pulled the pistol he had shot to puncture the balloon and the knife with which he had cut the green man’s throat from his waistband, and offered them to her. “Choice of weapons?”

She was close enough to the font to scent its nasty pong. She wrapped her hand in her sleeve, took the scoop and scooped it full, and flung the blessed water full in his face.

He shook the water away. “Oh, my dear, leave aside these childish superstitions.” He stooped for the discarded glove, wiped his face with it, and put it on again. “Choose your weapon, madam.”

Gun, knife? Don’t bring a knife to a gunfight! Obv! She grabbed the gun, turned and fled through the door of Nôtre Dame and up the nave. The knife whipped past her cheek as she turned her head to look for a hiding place, and buried itself in a writhing figure of Jesus on the cross.

Zoe crouched between two pews, sighted the gun and waited for him to come into view. No sign. Then a sound behind her. She whipped around and squeezed the trigger. A click. Nothing.

Polidori, smirking, pulled a pouch from his pocket. “Perhaps you forgot that you need gunpowder? And bullets? And a flint?” He opened his red mouth wide and laughed and laughed.

Zoe flung the gun at him and ran. She slid, rounded a corner and side-galloped behind a tapestry wreathed with flowers and fruit. She peered through, her cheek against the rough back of the tapestry, the ancient wool smell catching in the back of her throat. He was crossing the cathedral, his back

to her, looking from side to side. He opened the door of a confessional — “Come on out, wherever you are!”

She squeezed her eyes half-shut and looked to her left. A stone staircase led up — up, she supposed, to the choir loft. She tiptoed along the tapestry, stopping to see his progress. Once he turned and looked — it seemed straight at her — then went on.

She edged out from behind the tapestry. Her foot was on the first stair when he called, “Ah! There you are, my dear! How nice!”

Her legs felt as if they were seizing up, so slow, and she could hear him leaping up behind her, lithe and brisk. The stair stopped at a railed gate. Fuck! But then she remembered the oak door and stepped through. Bang! Her nose throbbed. Metal didn’t co-operate like wood.

Up here! a voice whispered. Up here! Up to the forest!

She looked up. A column of oak spiralled upwards. She jumped, jumped again, reaching up to it. His footsteps pounded up towards her, his breath harsh. Her fingers touched stone, centimetres away from the wood.

Come on! Come up!

She could still hear him coming. His breath was rasping in his throat.

She jumped again, scrabbled, clawed, and touched the wood, and as soon as her hand touched it she was grabbed up — just as his hand closed on her ankle — no, her shoe—

She curled into a ball and dug her nails into the oak, swarming up and up like a sailor up a mast. Below, the man cursed — “Corny-faced blouseabella fusscock!” and the knife came again, clattering against the stone and falling back on him. She heard him jump aside and she laughed, and the cramps went out of her legs.

She was high on the parapet, outside the cathedral — without knowing it, she had followed the line of oak. The envelope of the balloon bobbed lazily against the wall, just below her feet. She sat on the parapet, dangled her legs over and admired Paris — the Eiffel Tower was doing its sparkly thing again, or maybe it had never stopped. She laughed.

“What’s so funny, little thingumbob?”

“Ah, for fuck’s sake, not you again?” There he was, towering above her, but now she felt little fear of him. She reached to push him off, but he gripped his fingers, biting into her wrist and drew the soft inner flesh up towards his face. She felt herself lifted, and with the instinct and training of a Chelsea girl, gave him a sharp knee in the balls.

He staggered back, hissing, holding his hands protectively over the part.

Zoe monkey-streaked up to a flat place on the roof with — oddly — three cupboards set there. Oh, wait. There was something about those cupboards with their legs and their pointed rooves...

Polidori followed, climbing with his back rather humped. He rolled onto the roof and lay there retching. “Fustyplugs!” he choked. “Gnashgab!” He pulled himself up, supporting his weight on the roof of one of the cupboards. An angry hum came from inside.

“Oh, I wouldn’t!” Zoe backed away.

“Wouldn’t you, gobbermouch?” He launched a kick at her, and hit the cupboard.

“No! No!” But too late. A jet of bees swarmed out of first the cupboard — beehive — he had kicked and then the other two. They circled Zoe, ignored her and went straight for Polidori. He screamed, and staggered away.

The balloon took that moment to detach itself and float

upwards, and Polidori, seeing the silk, grabbed at it and whirled to wrap himself in it, while the bees attacked and backed and found new places to crawl in.

The basket, and the burner, came creeping over the edge. “No!” shouted Zoe again. “Fire!”

Polidori clawd his head free, and when he saw the fire catching on the silk he turned his eyes to her, and opened his mouth in the maddest laugh she had ever heard. “The fire will consume you too!” he said. “Fire will turn you to ash!”

As if his words were prophetic, the flames reached him, and half his face melted away, while the second half, in a scream that ended in a whisper, cried “Ash—”

But then — Zoe looked again. He had freed himself. He smashed through a stained glass window, the blood-red glass reflecting the scarlet flames, and disappeared into an attic filled with holy debris. His voice echoed back — “Fumblecunt! Glimbag!”

The flames were spreading fast. Trapped, Zoe put her hand on the wood of the hive he had kicked, and it spoke to her. *Leap! Leap now, and my ladies will carry you!*

She danced on the flames, but they were rising further. Inside, there was a roar. She could see the tourists below gathering to stare up, some kneeling and singing. A fragment of a hymn they were singing floated upwards. What the hell, she said. I’m as dead as I’m going to be.

She ran to the edge of the tower and jumped, and spread her arms and legs as if she were flying. And then she was, borne up by the bees of the cathedral, a million whirring wings carrying her across the river to float her down gently on place de Concorde.

chapter nineteen

Amanda Hicks

WHAT FEW SHADOWS ZOE could see through the smoke were long and flickering. She imagined that they were following her. She expected to finally feel warm again from the cathedral fire, but instead her bones and muscles were still cold and a million tiny, burning pinpricks danced on her skin. Kate had often described her anxiety attacks this way.

Once she passed through the crowds of people staring at the burning cathedral, she saw a pub playing 80s American music ahead. Hell, she was supposed to be on holiday. Why not? So she ducked in, expecting to feel the familiar warmth of pub rush over her. Instead, it was all music and bodies.

Oh, daddy dear, don't be mad. You're number one.

But gals, they need to have fu-un.

She ordered a rose cocktail, a concoction that Kate had found on an internet post. It was supposedly a 1920's Parisian favorite. She took an empty seat in the corner, facing the door, and surveyed the room for the person Kate would have been

most likely to snog.

There was a man wearing what she had called the “pimp jumper”, a purple thing from manho.com. Definitely not him. Another looked vaguely like Prince William. Kate would have avoided him like the plague. Her name was already enough to draw unwelcome comparisons to the Duchess. But the woman who looked like Meghan Markle was a good prospect.

Zoe looked at her luridly red cocktail and muttered, “Here they are, Kate, wearing the clothes we sold them (poor sops), having the holiday we planned together (lucky bastards), and I’m avoiding mirrors, missing you, and wondering if I’ll ever feel warm on the inside again.”

Some guys take a beautiful gal
and hide her away from the rest of her pals
I wanna sing and dance and laugh in the sun.
Oh gals, they need to have fu-un
Oh gals just need to ha-ave fun.

Stepping back outside, the pinpricks returned. She rushed through the streets focusing on her destination and putting as much ground between the broken holiday and herself as possible. Arriving at an old building, she walked over time-worn colorful tiles and up a staircase with gracefully twisting Art Nouveau branches carved on the banister. She stopped before a door with an old ceramic cylinder and a Hebrew character – she didn’t know which – on the door post and tried the knob. It was locked. Perfect! Georgie Porgie was out. She searched her pockets for something useful, and pulled one of Kate’s hairpins out of her sooty blue jeans. As she fiddled with the lock she remembered when Craig showed her how to do this. Mum kept the Christmas presents locked up in the

attic, and as children they were impatient.

The door swung open and she stepped into George Gordan's office. This time, the shadows were stable as she stepped into a dimly lit room, curtains drawn, and a round figure at the desk staring straight at her.

"And here you are." George's voice was enough to make any living person's blood run cold. But as Zoe was undead and already cold, the effect was not quite as potent.

"Yes, and you are here too." She replied, putting the hairpin back in her pocket. "Remind me why the big bad boss doesn't have better security, or at least a decent lock?"

"Young girls are so predictable. All you want is to be seen. Security is for people who attract attention, but those who stay in the shadows are the ones doing the seeing. The shadows in this city, Zoe, are my eyes. You have been gouging my eyes out, one by one. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't gouge you out too."

"I could ask the same of you," Zoe retorted.

"Oh, you really don't know anything about what we are, about how I own you, do you?"

"Nobody owns me. And nobody *knows* what we are. That's the whole point. All we have is bits of lore passed down. We don't know how they've been distorted or corrupted from the truth. We don't even know if they were ever based in any truth at all."

"We are the sum of our lore, the sum of our tradition. The tales that are passed from one mouth to another make us what we are, just like the bloodline that passes from one mouth to another. What reason do you have to doubt it?"

"What reason do *you* have to believe it? It's true that mythical creatures are the sum of their lore. I used to think vampires were just stories, and stories are only what anyone

says they are. But when something's real, it can be questioned. You can be questioned. Look at you, for instance. You have a copy of the 10 Commandments on your wall, but refuse to have a cross. Do you know how contradictory and superstitious that is?"

"Learn your history, child! The 10 Commandments are passed down through the line of Moses, but the sign of the cross has spread pain and destruction. You think I'm ignorant because the 10 Commandments say 'Thou shalt not kill' yet I suck the life of mortals? You think I shun the cross from cowardice? The life I take is not killing anymore than not being since is being blind. But the rituals must be respected and the history preserved. I would have taken you in, Zoe, and guided you. I would have kept you safe and seeing, if not seen. Your questioning has told you nothing about who you are. It has only deprived me of my eyes, of my children, and obscured from you the simple fact that I am your lord, your father. I own you."

"Nobody owns me!" Zoe was losing patience. "If you say so one more time, I will turn you into my next experiment." She walked over to the blackout curtains and placed her hand on one. "You believe that you need eyes in the shadows of the city because you refuse to go walk in the daylight. But let me ask you this. Do you really know what daylight does? Shall we find out? The has risen by now, right?"

"Are you so reckless that you would kill yourself for the answer? I am the Lord Vampire, Zoe. Do you even know what *that* is?"

"Yes, it means you're a megalomaniacal patriarch and the world won't miss you if you're gone."

"It means that centuries ago I created the bloodline that you are now a part of. If you snuff me out, you snuff out

yourself. Are you so curious that you would sacrifice yourself for an answer you could never share with the world? Go ahead, but if you do, you will never see nor be seen again.”

Zoe’s hand waivered. She wanted to end this. She also wanted to know, but what good was knowing if it just left unanswered questions? Craig would never now what happened to her, and after they lost their parents, he couldn’t lose her too. Kate’s parents would never know what happened to their daughter, and they had been so kind to Zoe after her parents died. She would probably never see Raymond again anyway, but maybe ...

“So what now?” Zoe asked. “We just sit here and stare at each other until the sun sets?”

“Sweetheart, do you still need attention so badly?” George smirked.

That condescending, patriarchal, betraying mother of ... Zoe was so angry! For a brief moment she contemplated risking everything just to show this man what was what! But somehow, she managed to keep command of herself and keep her hand still.

Not that it mattered.

Before Zoe had time to stop seeing read, the door swung open and everything was dark. Suddenly, she was inhaling musty, dusty air through the thick velvet drapes, had done a full turn, lost her balance and was leaning against something or someone quite solid all while wrapped in a cocoon of drapery.

“Don’t move,” came a familiar deep voice.

Zoe didn’t know whether it was talking to her or her ever-condescending “Lord Vampire”, but it didn’t matter. “Damn it, Raymond! I told you to get the hell out of dodge!”

“Don’t move.” He repeated. “The sunlight lore is true. I have to get you out of the curtains *and* close them at the same

time.”

Unwrapping a woman from a velvet drape while not exposing her to sunlight is an awkward and delicate process even when the woman is calm and happy to see the man on the other side of the curtain. It is especially awkward and delicate when the woman has just lost her best friend, is covered in soot, was just venting her anger at the patriarchy, and does not want the man on the other side to be in the same city, let alone in the same room. Nevertheless, after some manoeuvring and muffled swearing, Zoe and Raymond stood facing each other.

“Where is Georgie Porgie?” Zoe demanded.

Raymond motioned to a pile of ash on the floor and pulled up a chair.

“Why are you here?” Zoe followed up.

“I was at Notre Dame”, Raymond said.

Zoe arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms. Now that Raymond was sitting, she was looking him straight in the eyes. “And?”

“And I saw you.”

“And you followed me. Knowing I thought you had left town!”

“Maybe we should just sit her and stare at each other until the sun sets.”